HALO®: FIRST STRIKE

ERIC NYLUND

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Foreword

In the aftermath of the launch of *Halo*Â®: *Reach,* the prequel video game for the Xbox 360, readers have a lot of questions. Luckily, of all the Halo novels, *First Strike* is the one that answers the most, at least as those questions relate to the events of *Halo*Â® *1, 2,* and *Reach*. Naturally, that is not a coincidence.

It offers insight into Spartan lore, the Forerunner enigma, Covenant treachery, and much, much more.

Working with Eric over the years, we here at the Halo franchise have put the poor fellow through hell. But like Dante, he seems to have the intestinal fortitude to deal with any layer we offer him. In *First Strike,* he finally got the chance to talk directly to the game fiction, yet did so without relying too much on the Chiefâs lone-wolf heroics, or the linear nature of the game-play events.

Furthermore, Eric introduced us to some truly memorable characters, and deepened and broadened the ones we were already familiar with. Broads that included, of course, Dr. Halsey and Cortana.

Spoilers aheadâ¦

Halseyâs excavation of the Forerunner cavern in *First Strike* can be glimpsed in the Reach game, and Cortanaâs eventual fate, with a little geographical tinkering by Bungie, is also illuminated in the game.

Now, if you think about the challenges of creating all-new charactersâincluding a passel of Spartansâwhile still maintaining solid connections to the game, and never overstepping the bounds of a chronological jail we popped him into, you begin to see the level of skill and attention to detail Mr. Nylund brought to the table.

Eric is also a master of encapsulation. *First Strike* still feels, like *Fall of Reach* before it, foundational, but as we see in Halseyâs journal entries included in the *Reach* gameâs limited and legendary editions, he also has a knack for tying up ends that, while never loose, were sometimes knotted somewhere in the deep canon.

Of all the Halo novels, *First Strike,* to me, captures the best

balance of high adventure and game connection. It does so effortlessly and in some places, it actually feels like a video game. You hurtle through each encounter with hardly a breath to spare, and if you find yourself looking for a save-game feature, simply do what I do, and fold the corner of the page. It adds character.

Section 0
Reach

DISCOVERY

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Chapter One

0558 Hours, August 30, 2552 (Military Calendar) \ UNSC vessel *Pillar of Autumn*, Epsilon Eridani System Near Reach Station Gamma.

SPARTAN 104, Frederic, twirled a combat knife, his fingers nimble despite the bulky MJOLNIR combat armor that encased his body. The blade traced a complicated series of graceful arcs in the air. The few remaining Naval personnel on the deck turned pale and averted their eyesâa Spartan wielding a knife was generally accompanied by the presence of several dead bodies.

He was nervous, and this was more than the normal pre-mission jitters. The teamâs original objectiveâthe capture of a Covenant shipâhad been scrubbed in the face of a new enemy offensive. The Covenant were en route to Reach, the last of the United Nations Space Commandâs major military strongholds.

Fred couldnât help but wonder what use ground troops would be in a ship-to-ship engagement. The knife spun.

Around him, his squadmates loaded weapons, stacked gear, and prepped for combat, their efforts redoubled since the shipâs Captain had personally come down to the mustering area to brief the team leader, SPARTAN 117âbut Fred was already squared away. Only Kelly had finished stowing gear before him.

He balanced the point of the knife on his armored finger. It hung there for several seconds, perfectly still.

A subtle shift in the *Pillar of Autumn*âs gravity caused the knife to tip. Fred plucked it from the air and sheathed it in a single deft move. A cold feeling filled his stomach as he realized what the gravity fluctuation meant: The ship had just changed courseâanother complication.

Master Chief SPARTAN 117âJohnâmarched to the nearest COM panel as Captain Keyesâs face filled the screen.

Fred sensed a slight movement to his rightâa subtle hand

signal from Kelly. He opened a private COM freq to his teammate.

âLooks like weâre in for more surprises,â she said.

âRoger that,â he replied, âthough I think Iâve had enough surprises for one op.â

Kelly chuckled.

Fred focused his attention on Johnâs exchange with Keyes. Each Spartanâselected from an early age and trained to the pinnacle of military scienceâhad undergone multiple augmentation procedures: biochemical, genetic, and cybernetic. As a result, a Spartan could hear a pin drop in a sandstorm, and every Spartan in the room was interested in what the Captain had to say. *If youâre going to drop into hell,* CPO Mendez, the Spartansâ first teacher, had once said, *you may as well drop with good intel.*

Captain Keyes frowned on the shipâs viewscreen, a nonregulation pipe in his hand. Though his voice was calm, the Captainâs grip on the pipe was white-knuckle tight as he outlined the situation. A single space vessel docked in Reachâs orbital facilities had failed to delete its navigational database. If the NAV data fell into Covenant hands, the enemy would have a map to Earth.

âMaster Chief,â the Captain said, âI believe the Covenant will use a pinpoint Slipspace jump to a position just off the space dock. They may try to get their troops on the station before the Super MAC guns can take out their ships. This will be a difficult mission, Chief. Iâmâ¦open to suggestions.â

âWe can take care of it,â the Master Chief replied.

Captain Keyesâs eyes widened and he leaned forward in his command chair. âHow exactly, Master Chief?â

âWith all due respect, sir, Spartans are trained to handle difficult missions. Iâll split my squad. Three will board the space dock and make sure that NAV data does not fall into the Covenantâs hands. The remainder of the Spartans will go groundside and repel the invasion forces.â

Fred gritted his teeth. Given his choice, heâd rather fight the Covenant on the ground. Like his fellow Spartans, he loathed off-planet duty. The op to board the space dock would be fraught with danger at every turnâunknown enemy deployment, no gravity, useless intel, no dirt beneath his feet.

There was no question, though: The space op was the toughest duty, so Fred intended to volunteer for it.

Captain Keyes considered Johnâs suggestion. âNo, Master Chief. Itâs too riskyâweâve got to make sure the Covenant donât get that NAV data. Weâll use a nuclear mine, set it close to the docking ring, and detonate it.â

âSir, the EMP will burn out the superconductive coils of the orbital guns. And if you use the *Pillar of Autumn*âs conventional weapons, the NAV database may still survive. If the Covenant search the wreckage, they may obtain the data.â

âTrue,â Keyes said and tapped his pipe thoughtfully to his chin. âVery well, Master Chief. Weâll go with your suggestion. Iâll plot a course over the docking station. Ready your Spartans and prep two dropships. Weâll launch youââ He consulted with Cortana. ââin five minutes.â

âAye, Captain. Weâll be ready.â

âGood luck,â Captain Keyes said, and the viewscreen went black.

Fred snapped to attention as the Master Chief turned to face the Spartans. Fred began to step forwardâ

âbut Kelly beat him to it. âMaster Chief,â she said, âpermission to lead the space op.â

She had always been faster, damn her.

âDenied,â the Master Chief said. âIâll be leading that one.

âLinda and James,â he continued. âYouâre with me. Fred, youâre Red Team leader. Youâll have tactical command of the ground operation.â

âSir!â Fred shouted and started to voice a protestâthen squelched it. Now wasnât the time to question ordersâ¦as much as he wanted to. âYes, sir!â

âNow make ready,â the Master Chief said. âWe donât have much time left.â

The Spartans stood a moment. Kelly called out, âAttention!â The soldiers snapped to and gave the Master Chief a crisp salute, which was promptly returned.

Fred switched to Red Teamâs all-hands freq and barked, âLetâs move, Spartans! I want gear stowed in ninety seconds, and final prep in five minutes. Joshua: Liaise with Cortana and get me current intel on the drop areaâI donât care if itâs just weather satellite imagery, but I want pictures, and I want them

ninety seconds ago.â

Red Team jumped into action.

The pre-mission jitters were gone, replaced with a cold calm. There was a job to do, and Fred was eager to get to work.

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Flight Officer Mitchell flinched as a stray energy burst streaked into the landing bay and vaporized a meter-wide section of bulkhead. Red-hot, molten metal splattered the Pelican dropshipâs viewport.

Screw this, he thought, and hit the Pelicanâs thrusters. The gun-metal-green transportâreinforced to carry more than twenty Spartansâbalanced for a moment on a column of blue-white fire, then hurtled out of the *Pillar of Autumn*âs launch bay and into space. Five seconds later all hell broke loose.

Incoming energy bursts from the lead Covenant vessels cut across their vector and slammed into a COMSat. The communications satellite broke apart, disintegrating into glittering shards.

âBetter hang on,â Mitchell announced to his passengers in the dropshipâs troop bay. âCompanyâs coming.â

A swarm of Seraphsâthe Covenantâs scarablike attack fightersâfell into tight formation and arced through space on an intercept course for the dropship.

The Pelicanâs engines flared and the bulky ship plummeted toward the surface of Reach. The alien fighters accelerated and plasma bursts flickered from their gunports.

An energy bolt slashed past on the port side, narrowly missing the Pelicanâs cockpit.

Mitchellâs voice crackled across the COM system: âBravo-One to Knife Two-Six: I could use a little help here.â

He rolled the Pelican to port to avoid a massive, twisted hunk of wreckage from a patrol cutter that had strayed too close to the oncoming assault wave. Beneath the blackened plasma scorches, he could just make out the UNSC insigne. Mitchell scowled. This was getting worse by the second. âBravo-One to Knife Two-Six, where the hell are you?â he yelled.

A quartet of wedge-shaped, angular fighters slotted into covering position on Mitchellâs scopesâLongswords, heavy fighters.

âKnife Two-Six to Bravo-One,â a terse, female voice crackled across the COM channel. *âKeep your pants on. Business is good today.â*

Too good. No sooner had the fighters taken escort position over his dropship than the approaching Covenant fighters opened up with a barrage of plasma fire.

Three of the Pelicanâs four Longsword escorts peeled off and powered toward the Covenant ships. Against the black of space, cannons flashed and missiles etched ghostly trails; Covenant energy weapons cut through the night and explosions dotted the sky.

The Pelican and its sole escort, however, accelerated straight toward the planet. It shot past whirling wreckage; it rolled and maneuvered as missiles and plasma bolts crisscrossed their path.

Mitchell flinched as Reachâs orbital defense guns fired in a hot, actinic flash. A white ball of molten metal screamed directly over the Pelican and its escort as they rocketed beneath the defense platformâs ring-shaped superstructure.

Mitchell sent the Pelican into the planetâs atmosphere. Vaporous flames flickered across the shipâs stunted nose, and the Pelican jounced from side to side.

âBravo-One, adjust attack angle,â the Longsword pilot advised. *âYouâre coming in too hot.â*

âNegative,â Mitchell said. âWeâre getting to the surface fastâor weâre not getting there at all. Enemy contacts on my scopes at four by three oâclock.â

A dozen more Covenant Seraphs fired their engines and angled toward the two descending ships.

âAffirmative: four by three. Iâve got âem, Bravo-One,â the Longsword pilot announced. *âGive âem hell down there.â*

The Longsword flipped into a tight roll and rocketed for the Covenant formation. There was no chance that the pilot could take out a dozen Seraphsâand Knife Two-Six had to know that. Mitchell only hoped that the precious seconds Two-Six bought them would be enough.

The Pelican opened its intake vents and ignited afterburners, plummeting toward the ground at thirteen hundred meters per second. The faint aura of flames around the craft roared from red to blinding orange.

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The Pelicanâs aft section had been stripped of the padded crash seats that usually lined the sectionâs port and starboard sides. The life-support generators on the firewall between passenger and pilotâs compartment had also been discarded to make room. Under other circumstances, such modifications would have left the Pelicanâs troop bay unusually cavernous. Every square centimeter of space, however, was occupied.

Twenty-two Spartans braced themselves and clung to the frame of the ship; they crouched in their MJOLNIR armor to absorb the shock of their rapid descent. Their armor was half a ton of black alloy, faintly luminous green ceramic plates, and winking energy shield emitters. Polarized visors and full helmets made them look part Greek hero and part tankâmore machine than human. At their feet equipment bags and ammunition boxes were lashed in place. Everything rattled as the ship jostled through the increasingly dense air.

Fred hit the COM and barked: âBrace yourselves!â The ship lurched, and he struggled to keep his footing.

SPARTAN 087, Kelly, moved nearer and opened a frequency. âChief, weâll get that COM malfunction squared away after we hit planetside,â she said.

Fred winced when he realized that heâd just broadcast on FLEETCOM 7: Heâd spammed every ship in range. Damn it.

He opened a private channel to Kelly. âThanks,â he said. Her reply was a subtle nod.

He knew better than to make such a simple mistakeâand as his second in command, Kelly was rattled by his mistake with the COM, too. He needed her rock-solid. He needed *all* of Red Team frosty and wired tight.

Which meant that *he* needed to make sure he held it together. No more mistakes.

He checked the squadâs biomonitors. They showed all green on his heads-up display, with pulse rates only marginally accelerated. The dropshipâs pilot was a different story. Mitchellâs heart fired like an assault rifle.

Any problems with Red Team werenât physical; the biomonitors confirmed that much. Spartans were used to tough missions; UNSC High Command never sent them on any âeasyâ

jobs.

Their job this time was to get groundside and protect the generators that powered the orbiting Magnetic Accelerator Cannon platforms. The fleet was getting ripped to shreds in space. The massive MAC guns were the only thing keeping the Covenant from overrunning their lines and taking Reach.

Fred knew that if anything had Kelly and the other Spartans rattled, it was leaving behind the Master Chief and his hand-picked Blue Team.

Fred would have infinitely preferred to be with Blue Team. He knew every Spartan here felt like they were taking the easy way out. If the ship-jockeys managed to hold off the Covenant assault wave, Red Teamâs mission was a milk run, albeit a necessary one.

Kellyâs hand bumped into Fredâs shoulder, and he recognized it as a consoling gesture. Kellyâs razor-edged agility was multiplied fivefold by the reactive circuits in her MJOLNIR armor. She wouldnât have âaccidentallyâ touched him unless she meant it, and the gesture spoke volumes.

Before he could say anything to her, the Pelican angled and gravity settled the Spartansâ stomachs.

âRough ride ahead,â the pilot warned.

The Spartans bent their knees as the Pelican rolled into a tight turn. A crate broke its retaining straps, bounced, and stuck to the wall.

The COM channel blasted static and resolved into the voice of the Longswordâs pilot: *âBravo Two-Six, engaging enemy fighters. Am taking heavy incoming fireâ* The channel was abruptly swallowed in static.

An explosion buffeted the Pelican, and bits of metal pinged off its thick hull.

Patches of armor heated and bubbled away. Energy blasts flashed through the boiling metal, filling the interior with fumes for a split second before the shipâs pressurized atmosphere blew the haze out the gash in its side.

Sunlight streamed though the lacerated Titanium-A armor. The dropship lurched to port, and Fred glimpsed five Covenant Seraph fighters driving after them and wobbling in the turbulent air.

âGotta shake âem,â the pilot screamed. *âHang on!â*

The Pelican pitched forward, and her engines blasted in full overload. The dropshipâs stabilizers tore away, and the craft rolled out of control.

The Spartans grabbed on to cross beams as their gear was flung about inside the ship.

âItâs going to be a helluva hot drop, Spartans,â their pilot hissed over the COM. *âAutopilotâs programmed to angle. Reverse thrusters. Gees are takinâ me out. Iâllââ*

A flash of light outlined the cockpit hatch, and the tiny shock-proof glass window shattered into the passenger compartment.

The pilotâs biomonitor flatlined.

The rate of their dizzying roll increased, and bits of metal and instruments tore free and danced around the compartment.

SPARTAN 029, Joshua, was closest to the cockpit hatch. He pulled himself up and looked in. âPlasma blast,â he said. He paused for a heartbeat, then added: âIâll reroute control to the terminal here.â With his right hand, he furiously tapped commands onto the keyboard mounted on the wall. The fingers of his left hand dug into the metal bulkhead.

Kelly crawled along the starboard frame, held there by the spinning motion of the out-of-control Pelican. She headed aft of the passenger compartment and punched a keypad, priming the explosive bolts on the drop hatch.

âFire in the hole!â she yelled.

The Spartans braced.

The hatch exploded and whipped away from the plummeting craft. Fire streamed along the outer hull. Within seconds the compartment became a blast furnace. With the grace of a high-wire performer, Kelly leaned out of the rolling ship, her armorâs energy shields flaring in the heat.

The Covenant Seraph fighters fired their lasers, but the energy weapons scattered in the superheated wake of the dropping Pelican. One alien ship tumbled out of control, too deep in the atmosphere to easily maneuver. The others veered and arced up back into space.

âToo hot for them,â Kelly said. âWeâre on our own.â

âJoshua,â Fred called out. âReport.â

âThe autopilotâs gone, and cockpit controls are offline,â Joshua answered. âI can counter our spin with thrusters.â He tapped in a command; the port engine shuddered, and the shipâs

rolling slowed and ceased.

âCan we land?â Fred asked.

Joshua didnât hesitate to give the bad news. âNegative. The computer has no solution for our inbound vector.â He tapped rapidly on the keyboard. âIâll buy as much time as I can.â

Fred ran over their limited options. They had no parasails, no rocket-propelled drop capsules. That left them one simple choice: They could ride this Pelican straight into hellâ¦or they could get off.

âGet ready for a fast drop,â Fred shouted. âGrab your gear. Pump your suitsâ hydrostatic gel to maximum pressure. Suck it up, Spartansâweâre landing hard.â

âHard landingâ was an understatement. The Spartansâand their MJOLNIR armorâwere tough. The armorâs energy shields, hydrostatic gel, and reactive circuits, along with the Spartansâ augmented skeletal structure, might be enough to withstand a high-speed crash landingâ¦but not a supersonic impact.

It was a dangerous gamble. If Joshua couldnât slow the Pelicanâs descent, theyâd be paste.

âTwelve thousand meters to go,â Kelly shouted, still leaning over the edge of the aft door.

Fred told the Spartans: âReady and aft. Jump on my mark.â

The Spartans grabbed their gear and moved toward the open hatch.

The Pelicanâs engines screamed and pulsed as Joshua angled the thruster cams to reverse positions. The deceleration pulled at the Spartan team, and everyone grabbed, or made, a hand-hold.

Joshua brought what was left of the craftâs control flaps to bear, and the Pelicanâs nose snapped up. A sonic boom rippled through the ship as its velocity dropped below Mach 1. The frame shuddered and rivets popped.

âEight kilometers and this brick is still dropping fast,â Kelly called out.

âJoshua, get aft,â Fred ordered.

âAffirmative,â Joshua said.

The Pelican groaned and the frame pinged from the stressâand then creaked as the craft shuddered and flexed. Fred set his armored glove on the wall and tried to will the craft to hold together a little longer.

It didnât work. The port engine exploded, and the Pelican

tumbled out of control.

Kelly and the Spartans near the aft drop hatch dropped out.

No more time.

âJump,â Fred shouted. *âSpartans: Go, go, go!â*

The rest of the Spartans crawled aft, fighting the gee forces of the tumbling Pelican. Fred grabbed Joshuaâand they jumped.

Chapter Two

**0631 Hours, August 30, 2552 (Military Calendar) \
Epsilon Eridani System, Unknown Aerial Position,
Planet Reach.**

Fred saw the sky and earth flashing in rapid succession before his faceplate. Decades of training took over. This was just like a parasail dropâ¦except this time there was no chute. He forced his arms and legs open; the spread-eagle position controlled his tumble and slowed his velocity.

Time seemed to simultaneously crawl and raceâsomething Kelly had once dubbed âSpartan Time.â Enhanced senses and augmented physiology meant that in periods of stress Spartans thought and reacted faster than a normal human. Fredâs mind raced as he absorbed the tactical situation.

He activated his motion sensors, boosting the range to maximum. His team appeared as blips on his heads-up display. With a sigh of relief he saw that all twenty-two of them were present and pulling into a wedge formation.

âCovenant ground forces could be tracking the Pelican,â Fred told them over the COM. âExpect AA fire.â

The Spartans immediately broke formation and scattered across the sky.

Fred risked a sidelong glance and spotted the Pelican. It tumbled, sending shards of armor plating in glittering, ugly arcs, before it impacted into the side of a jagged snowcapped mountain.

The surface of Reach stretched out before them, two thousand meters below. Fred saw a carpet of green forest, ghostly mountains in the distance, and pillars of smoke rising from the west. He spied a sinuous ribbon of water that he recognized: Big Horn River.

The Spartans had trained on Reach for most of their early lives. This was the same forest where CPO Mendez had left them when they were children. With only pieces of a map and no food, water, or weapons, they had captured a guarded dropship and returned to HQ. That was the mission where John, now the

Master Chief, had earned command of the group, the mission that had forged them into a team.

Fred pushed the memory aside. This was no homecoming.

UNSC Military Reservation 01478-B training facility would be due west. And the generators? He called up the terrain map and overlaid it on his display. Joshua had done his work well: Cortana had delivered decent satellite imagery as well as a topographic survey map. It wasnât as good as a spy-sat flyby, but it was better than Fred had expected on such short notice.

He dropped a NAV marker on the position of the generator complex and uploaded the data on the TACCOM to his team.

He took a deep breath and said: âThatâs our target. Move toward it but keep your incoming angle flat. Aim for the treetops. Let them slow you down. If you canât, aim for waterâ¦and tuck in your arms and legs before impact.â

Twenty-one blue acknowledgment lights winked, confirming his order.

âOverpressurize your hydrostatics just before you hit.â

That would risk nitrogen embolisms for his Spartans, but they were coming in at terminal velocity, which for a fully loaded Spartan wasâhe quickly calculatedâ130 meters per second. They had to overpressurize the cushioning gel or their organs would be crushed against the impervious MJOLNIR armor when they hit.

The acknowledgment lights winked againâ¦although Fred sensed a slight hesitation.

Five hundred meters to go.

He took one last look at his Spartans. They were scattered across the horizon like bits of confetti.

He brought up his knees and changed his center of mass, trying to flatten his angle as he approached the treetops. It worked, but not as well or as quickly as he had hoped.

One hundred meters to go. His shield flickered as he brushed the tops of the tallest of the trees.

He took a deep breath, exhaled as deeply as he could, grabbed his knees, and tucked into a ball. He overrode the hydrostatic system and overpressurized the gel surrounding his body. A thousand tiny knives stabbed himâpain unlike any heâd experienced since the SPARTAN-II program had surgically altered him.

The MJOLNIR armorâs shields flared as he broke through branchesâthen drained in one sudden burst as he impacted dead-center on a thick tree trunk. He smashed through it like an armored missile.

He tumbled, and his body absorbed a series of rapid-fire impacts. It felt like taking a full clip of assault rifle fire at point-blank range. Seconds later Fred slammed to a bone-crunching halt.

His suit malfunctioned. He could no longer see or hear anything. He stayed in that limbo state and struggled to stay conscious and alert. Moments later, his display was filled with stars. He realized then that the suit wasnât malfunctioningâ¦*he* was.

âChief!â Kellyâs voice echoed in his head as if from the end of a long tunnel. âFred, get up,â she whispered. âWeâve got to move.â

His vision cleared, and he slowly rolled onto his hands and knees. Something hurt inside, like his stomach had been torn out, diced into little pieces, and then stitched back together all wrong. He took a ragged breath. That hurt, too.

The pain was goodâit helped keep him alert.

âStatus,â he coughed. His mouth tasted like copper.

Kelly knelt next to him and on a private COM channel said, âAlmost everyone has minor damage: a few blown shield generators, sensor systems, a dozen broken bones and contusions. Nothing we canât compensate for. Six Spartans have more serious injuries. They can fight from a fixed position, but they have limited mobility.â She took a deep breath and then added, âFour KIA.â

Fred struggled to his feet. He was dizzy but remained upright. He had to stay on his feet no matter what. He had to for the team, to show them they still had a functioning leader.

Spartan military operations rarely saw any casualties at all, but heâd already lost four, and this op had barely begun. Fred wasnât superstitious, but he couldnât help but feel that the Spartansâ luck was running out.

âYou did what you had to,â Kelly said as if she were reading his mind. âMost of us wouldnât have made it if you hadnât been thinking on your feet.â

Fred snorted in disgust. Kelly thought heâd been thinking on

his feetâbut all heâd done was land on his ass. He didnât want to talk about itânot now. âAny other good news?â he said.

âPlenty,â she replied. âOur gearâmunitions boxes, bags of extra weaponsâtheyâre scattered across whatâs passing for our LZ. Only a few of us have assault rifles, maybe five in total.â

Fred instinctively reached for his MA5B and discovered that the anchoring clips on his armor had been sheared away in the impact. No grenades on his belt, either. His drop bag was gone, too.

He shrugged. âWeâll improvise,â he said.

Kelly picked up a rock and hefted it.

Fred resisted the urge to lower his head and catch his breath. There was nothing he wanted to do more right now than sit down and just rest and think. There had to be a way to get his Spartans out of here in one piece. It was like a training exerciseâall he needed to do was figure out how best to accomplish their mission with no more foul-ups.

There was no time, though. Theyâd been sent to protect those generators, and the Covenant sure as hell werenât sitting around waiting for them to make the first move. The columns of smoke that marked where Reach HighCom once stood testified to that.

âAssemble the team,â Fred told her. âFormation Beta. Weâre heading toward the generators on foot. Pack out our wounded and dead. Send those with weapons ahead as scouts. Maybe our luck will change.â

Kelly barked over the SQUADCOM: âMove, Spartans. Formation Beta to the NAV point.â

Fred initiated a diagnostic on his armor. The hydrostatic subsystem had blown a seal, and pressure was at minimal functional levels. He could move, but heâd have to replace that seal before heâd be able to sprint or dodge plasma fire.

He fell in behind Kelly and saw his Spartans on the periphery of his tactical friend-or-foe monitor. He couldnât actually see any of them because they were spread out and darted from tree to tree to avoid any Covenant surprises. They all moved silently through the forest: light and shadow and an occasional muted flash of luminous green armor, then gone again.

âRed-One, this is Red-Twelve. Single enemy contactâ¦neutralized.â

âOne here, too,â Red-Fifteen reported. *âNeutralized.â*

There had to be more. Fred knew the Covenant never traveled in small numbers.

Worse, if the Covenant were deploying troops in any significant numbers, that meant the holding action in orbit had turned uglyâ¦so it was only a matter of time before this mission went from bad to worse.

He was so intent on listening to his teamâs field checks, he almost ran into a pair of Jackals. He instinctively melted into the shadow of a tree and froze.

The Jackals hadnât seen him. The birdlike aliens sniffed at the air, however, and then moved forward more cautiously, closing on Fredâs concealed position. They waved plasma pistols before them and clicked on their energy shields. The small, oblong protective fields rippled and solidified with a muted hum.

Fred keyed his COM channel to Red-Two, twice. Her blue acknowledgment light immediately winked in response to his call for backup.

The Jackals suddenly turned to their right and sniffed rapidly.

A fist-sized rock whizzed in from the aliensâ left. It slammed into the lead Jackalâs occipital crest with a wet crack. The creature squawked and dropped to the ground in a pool of purple-black blood.

Fred darted ahead and in three quick steps closed with the remaining Jackal. He sidestepped around the plane of the energy shield and grabbed the creatureâs wrist. The Jackal squawked in fear and surprise.

He yanked the Jackalâs gun arm, hard, and then twisted. The Jackal struggled as its own weapon was forced into the mottled, rough skin of its neck.

Fred squeezed, and he could feel the alienâs bones shatter. The plasma pistol discharged in a bright, emerald flash. The Jackal flopped over on its back, minus its head.

Fred picked up the fallen weapons as Kelly emerged from the trees. He tossed her one of the plasma pistols, and she plucked it out of the air.

âThanks. Iâd still prefer my rifle to this alien piece of junk,â she groused.

Fred nodded, and clipped the other captured weapon to his harness. âBeats the hell out of throwing rocks,â he replied.

âAffirmative, Chief,â she said with a nod. âBut just barely.â

âRed-One,â Joshuaâs voice called over the SQUADCOM. âIâm a half-klick ahead of you. You need to see this.â

âRoger,â Fred told him. âRed Team, hold here and wait for my signal.â

Acknowledgment lights winked on.

In a half crouch, Fred made his way toward Joshua. There was light ahead: The shade thinned and vanished because the forest was gone. The trees had been leveled, every one blasted to splinters or burned to charred nubs.

There were bodies, too; thousands of Covenant Grunts, hundreds of Jackals and Elites littered the open field. There were also humansâall dead. Fred could see several fallen Marines still smoldering from plasma fire. There were overturned Scorpion tanks, Warthogs with burning tires, and a Banshee flier. The flier had snagged one canard on a loop of barbed wire, and it propelled itself, riderless, in an endless orbit.

The generator complex on the far side of this battlefield was intact, however. Reinforced concrete bunkers bristling with machine guns surrounded a low building. The generators were deep beneath there. So far it looked as if the Covenant had not managed to take them, though not for lack of trying.

âContacts ahead,â Joshua whispered.

Four blips appeared on his motion sensor. Friend-or-foe tags identified them as UNSC Marines, Company Charlie. Serial numbers flashed next to the men as his HUD picked them out on a topo map of the area.

Joshua handed Fred his sniper rifle, and he sighted the contacts through the scope. They were Marines, sure enough. They picked through the bodies that littered the area, looking for survivors and policing weapons and ammo.

Fred frowned; something about the way the Marine squad moved didnât feel right. They lacked unit cohesion, with their line ragged and exposed. They werenât using any of the available cover. To Fredâs experienced eye, the Marines didnât even seem to be heading in a specific direction. One of them just ambled in circles.

Fred sent a narrow-beam transmission on UNSC global frequency. âMarine patrol, this is Spartan Red Team. We are approaching your position from your six oâclock. Acknowledge.â

The Marines turned about and squinted in Fredâs direction,

and brought their assault rifles to bear. There was static on the channel, and then a hoarse, listless voice replied: *âSpartans? If you are what you say you areâ¦we could sure use a hand.â*

âSorry we missed the battle, Marine.â

ââMissedâ?â The Marine gave a short, bitter laugh. *âHell, Chief, this was just round one.â*

Fred returned the sniper rifle to Joshua, pointed toward his eyes and then to the Marines in the field. Joshua nodded, shouldered the rifle, and sighted them. His finger hovered near the weaponâs triggerânot *quite* on it. It never hurt to be careful.

Fred got up and walked to the cluster of Marines. He picked his way past a tangle of Grunt bodies and the twisted metal and charred tires that had once been a Warthog.

The men looked as if they had been to hell and back. They all sported burns, abrasions, and the kilometer-long stare indicative of near shock. They gaped at Fred, mouths open; it was a reaction that he had often seen when soldiers first glimpsed a Spartan: two meters tall, half a ton of armor, splashed with alien blood. It was a mix of awe and suspicion and fear.

He hated it. He just wanted to fight and win this war, like the rest of the soldiers in the UNSC. The Corporal seemed to snap out of his near fugue. He removed his helmet, scratched at his cropped red hair, and looked behind him. âChief, youâd better head back to base with us before they hit us again.â

Fred nodded. âHow many in your company, Corporal?â

The man glanced at his three companions and shook his head. âSay again, Chief?â

These men were likely on the verge of battle shock, so Fred controlled his impatience and replied in as gentle a voice as he could muster: âYour FOF tags say youâre with Charlie Company, Corporal. How many are you? How many wounded?â

âThereâs no wounded, Chief,â the Corporal replied. âThereâs no âcompanyâ either. Weâre all thatâs left.â

Chapter Three

**0649 Hours, August 30, 2552 (Military Calendar) \
Epsilon Eridani System, Orbital Defense Generator
Facility A-331, Planet Reach.**

Fred looked over the battlefield from the top of the southern bunker, his temporary command post. The structure had been hastily erected, and some of the fast-drying instacrete hadnât fully hardened.

The bunker was not the best defensive position, but it gave him a clear view of the area as his team worked to strengthen the perimeter of the generator complex. Spartans strung razor wire, buried Antilon mine packs, and swept the area on patrols. A six-man fireteam searched the battleground for weapons and ammunition.

Satisfied that the situation was as stable as possible, he sat and began to remove portions of his armor. Under normal circumstances a team of techs would assist in such work, but over time the Spartans had all learned how to make rudimentary field repairs. He located a broken pressure seal and quickly replaced it with an undamaged one heâd recovered from SPARTAN 059âs armor.

Fred scowled. He hated the necessity of stripping gear from Malcolmâs suit. But it would dishonor his fallen comrade not to use his gift of the spare part.

He banished thoughts of the drop and finished installing the seal. Self-recrimination was a luxury he could ill afford, and the Red Team Spartans didnât have a monopoly on hard times.

Charlie Companyâs surviving Marines had held off the Covenant assault with batteries of chainguns, Warthogs, and a pair of Scorpion tanks for almost an hour. Grunts had charged across the minefield and cleared a path for the Jackals and Elites.

Lieutenant Buckman, the Marinesâ CO, had been ordered to send the bulk of his men into the forest in an attempt to flank the enemy. He had called in air support, too.

He got it.

Reach HighCom must have realized the generators were in

danger of being overrun, so someone panicked and sent in bombers to hit the forest in a half-klick radius. That wiped out the Covenant assault wave. It also killed the Lieutenant and his men.

What a waste.

Fred replaced the last of his armor components and powered up. His status lights pulsed a cool blue. Satisfied, he stood and activated the COM.

âRed-Twelve, give me a sit-rep.â

Willâs voice crackled over the channel. *âPerimeter established, Chief. No enemy contacts.â*

âGood,â Fred replied. âMission status?â

âTen chainguns recovered and now provide blanketing fields of fire around the generator complex,â Will said. *âWeâve got three Banshee fliers working. Weâve also recovered thirty of those arm-mounted Jackal shield generators, plus a few hundred assault rifles, plasma pistols, and grenades.â*

âAmmo? We need it.â

âAffirmative, sir,â Will said. *âEnough to last for an hour of continuous fire.â* There was a short pause, then he added: *âHQ must have sent reinforcements at some point, because weâve recovered a crate marked HIGHCOM ARMORY OMEGA*.â

âWhatâs in it?â

âSix Anaconda surface-to-air missiles.â Willâs voice barely concealed his glee. *âAnd a pair of Fury tac-nukes.â*

Fred gave a low whistle. The Fury tac-nuke was the closest thing the UNSC had in its arsenal to a nuclear grenade. It was the size and shape of an overinflated football. It delivered slightly less than a megaton yield, and was extremely clean. Unfortunately, it was also completely useless to them in this situation.

âSecure that ordnance ASAP. We canât use them. The EMP would fry the generators.â

âRoger that,â Will said with a disappointed sigh.

âRed-Three?â Fred asked. âReport.â

There was a momentâs hesitation. Joshua whispered: *âNot good here, Red-One. Iâm posted on the ridge between our valley and the next. The Covenant has a massive LZ set up. Thereâs an enemy ship on station and I estimate battalion-strength enemy troops on the ground. Grunts, Jackals, equipment, and support armor are*

deploying. Looks like theyâre getting ready for round two, sir.â

Fred felt the pit of his stomach grow cold. âGive me an uplink.â

âRoger.â

A tiny picture appeared in Fredâs heads-up display, and he saw what Joshua had sighted through his sniperscope: A Covenant cruiser hovered thirty meters off the ground. The ship bristled with energy weapons and plasma artillery. His Spartans couldnât get within weapons range of that thing without being roasted.

A gravity lift connected the ship to the surface of Reach, and troops poured outâthousands of them: legions of Grunts, three full squadrons of Elites piloting Banshees, plus at least a dozen Wraith tanks.

It didnât make much sense, though. Why didnât the cruiser get closer and open fire? Or did the Covenant think there might be another air strike? The Covenant never hesitated during an assaultâ¦but the fact that he was still alive meant that the enemyâs rules of engagement had somehow changed.

Fred wasnât sure why the Covenant were being so cautious, but heâd take the break. It would give him time to figure out how to stop them. If the Spartans were mobile, they might be able to engage a force that size with hit-and-run tactics. Holding a fixed position was another story altogether.

âUpdates every ten minutes,â he told Joshua. His voice was suddenly tight and dry.

âRoger that.â

âRed-Two? Any progress on that SATCOM uplink?â

âNegative, sir,â Kelly muttered, tension thickening her voice. She had been tasked with patching Charlie Companyâs bullet-ridden communications pack. *âThere are battle reports jamming the entire spectrum, but from what I can make out the fight upstairs isnât going well. They need this generator upâno matter what itâs going to cost us.â*

âUnderstood,â Fred said. âKeep meââ

âWait. Incoming transmission to Charlie Company from Reach HighCom.â

HighCom? Fred thought headquarters on Reach had been overrun. âVerification codes?â

âThey check out,â Kelly replied.

âPatch it through.â

âCharlie Company? Jake? What the hell is the holdup there? Why havenât you gotten my men out yet?â

âThis is Senior Petty Officer SPARTAN 104, Red Team leader,â Fred replied, ânow in charge of Charlie Company. Identify yourself.â

âPut Lieutenant Chapman on, Spartan,â an irritated voice snapped.

âThatâs not possible, sir,â Fred told him, instinctively realizing that he spoke to an officer and adding the honorific. âExcept for four wounded Marines, Charlie Company is gone.â

There was a long static-filled pause. *âSpartan, listen to me very carefully. This is Vice Admiral Danforth Whitcomb, Deputy Chief of Naval Operations. Do you know who I am, son?â*

âYes, sir,â Fred said, wincing as the Admiral identified himself. If the Covenant were eavesdropping on this transmission, the senior officer had just made himself a giant target.

âMy staff and I are pinned down in a gully southeast of where HighCom used to be,â Whitcomb continued. *âGet your team over here and extract us, on the double.â*

âNegative, sir, I cannot do that. I have direct orders to protect the generator complex powering the orbital guns.â

âIâm countermanding those orders,â the Admiral barked. *âAs of two hours ago, I have tactical command of the defense of Reach. Now, I donât care if youâre a Spartan or Jesus Christ walking down the damned Big Horn RiverâI am giving you a* direct order. *Acknowledge, Spartan.â*

If Admiral Whitcomb was now in charge of the defense, then a lot of the senior brass had been put out of commission when HQ got hit.

Fred saw a tiny amber light flashing on his heads-up display. His biomonitor indicated an elevation in his blood pressure and heart rate. He noticed his hands shook, almost imperceptibly.

He controlled the shaking and keyed the COM. âAcknowledged, sir. Is air support available?â

âNegative. Covenant craft took out our fighter and bomber cover in the first wave.â

âVery well, sir. Weâll get you out.â

âStep on it, Chief.â The COM snapped off.

Fred wondered if Admiral Whitcomb was responsible for the hundreds of dead Marines whoâd been trying to guard the generators. No doubt he was an excellent ship driverâ¦but Fleet officers running ground ops? No wonder the situation was FUBAR.

Had he pressured a young and inexperienced lieutenant to flank a superior enemy? Had he sent in air support with orders to saturate-bomb the area?

Fred didnât trust the Admiralâs judgment, but he couldnât ignore a direct order from him, either.

He ran his team roster up onto his heads-up display: seventeen Spartans, six wounded so badly they could barely walk, and four battle-fatigued Marines whoâd been through hell once already. They had to repel a massive Covenant force. They had to extract Admiral Whitcomb, too. And as usual, their survival was at best a tertiary consideration.

He had weapons to defend the installation: grenades, chainguns, and missilesâ

Fred paused. Perhaps this was the wrong way to look at the tactical situation. He was thinking about *defending* the installation when he should have been thinking about what Spartans were best atâ*offense*.

He keyed the SQUADCOM. âEveryone catch that last transmission?â

Acknowledgment lights winked on.

âGood. Hereâs the plan: We split into four teams.

âTeam Deltaââ He highlighted the wounded Spartans and the four Marines on the roster. ââfall back to this location.â He uploaded a tactical map of the area and set a NAV marker in a ravine sixteen kilometers north. âTake two Warthogs, but leave them and stealth it if you encounter any resistance. Your mission is to secure the area. This will be the squadâs fallback position. Keep the back door open for us.â

They immediately acknowledged. The Spartans knew that ravine like the backs of their hands. It wasnât marked on any map, but it was where theyâd trained for months with Dr. Halsey. Beneath the mountain were caverns that the Office of Naval Intelligence had converted into a top-secret facility. It was fortified and hardened against radiation, and could probably withstand anything up to and including a direct nuclear strike. A

perfect hole to hide in if everything went sour.

âTeam Gamma.â Fred selected Red-Twenty, Red-Twenty-one, and Red-Twenty-two from the roster. âYouâll extract the Admiral and his staff and bring them back to the generators. Weâll need the extra crew.â

âAffirmative,â Red-Twenty-one replied.

Technically Fred was following Whitcombâs order to extract him from his current position. What the Admiral didnât realize, though, was that he would have probably been safer staying put.

âTeam Betaââ Fred selected the remaining Spartans from Red-Nineteen to Red-Four. ââyouâre on generator defense.â

âUnderstood, Chief.â

âTeam Alphaââ He selected Kelly, Joshua, and himself.

âAwaiting orders, sir,â Joshua said.

âWeâre going to that valley to kill anything there that isnât human.â

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Fred and Kelly faced the three Banshee fliers that had been dragged into the makeshift compound. Fred peered inside the cockpit of the nearest craft and tabbed the activation knob. The Banshee rose a meter off the ground, its anti-grav pod glowed a faint electric blue, and it started to drift forward. He snapped it off, and the Banshee settled to the ground. He quickly tested the other two, and they also rose off the ground.

âGood. All working.â

Kelly crossed her arms. âWeâre going for a ride?â

A Warthog pulled up and skidded to a halt in front of them, Joshua at the wheel. The rear held half a dozen Jackhammer missiles and a trio of launchers. A crate sat in the passengerâs seat, one loaded with the dark, emerald-green duct tape that every soldier in the UNSC ubiquitously referred to as âEB Green.â

âMission accomplished, sir,â Joshua said as he climbed from the Warthog.

Fred grabbed a launcher, a pair of rockets, and a roll of tape from the âHog. âWeâll be needing these when we hit the Covenant on the other side of the ridge,â he explained. âEach of you secure a launcher and some ammo in a Banshee.â

Joshua and Kelly stopped what they were doing and turned to

face him.

âPermission to speak, sir,â Kelly asked.

âGranted.â

âIâm all for a good fight, Fred, but those odds are a little lopsided even for usâ¦like ten thousand to one.â

âWe can handle a hundred to one,â Joshua chimed in, âmaybe even five hundred to one with a little planning and support, but against these odds, a frontal assault seemsââ

âItâs not going to be a frontal assault,â Fred said. He wedged the launcher into the cramped Banshee cockpit. âTape.â

Kelly ripped off a length of tape and handed it over.

Fred smoothed the adhesive strip and secured the launcher in place. âWeâll play this one as quiet as we can,â he said.

She considered Fredâs plan for a moment and then asked, âSo, assuming we fool them into letting us into their linesâ¦*then* what?â

âAs much as Iâd like to, we canât use the tac-nukes,â Joshua mused, ânot in the far valley. The intervening ridge isnât high enough to block the EMP. Itâll burn out the orbital defense generator.â

âThereâs another way to use them,â Fred told them. âWeâre going to board the cruiserâright up its gravity liftâand detonate the nuke *inside*. The shipâs shields will dampen the electromagnetic pulse.â

âItâll also turn that ship into the biggest fragmentation grenade in history,â Kelly remarked.

âAnd if anything goes wrong,â Joshua said, âwe end up in the middle of ten thousand pissed-off bad guys.â

âWeâre Spartans,â Fred said. âWhat could possibly go wrong? â

Chapter Four

**0711 Hours, August 30, 2552 (Military Calendar) \
Epsilon Eridani System, Longhorn Valley,
Planet Reach.**

The alarm hooted, and Zawaz sprang to his feet with a startled yelp. The squat alien, a Grunt clad in burnished orange armor, fumbled and dropped his motion scanner. He keened in fear and retrieved the device with a trembling claw. If the scanner had been damaged, the Elites would use his body as reactor shielding. If his masters learned heâd been asleep at his post, they might do *far* worse than kill him. They might give him to the Jackals.

Zawaz shuddered.

Fortunately, the scanner still worked, and the diminutive alien sighed with relief. Three contacts rapidly approached the mountain that separated Zawazâs cadre from the distant human forces. He reached for the warning klaxon but relaxed as his detector identified the contactsâBanshee fliers.

He peered over the dirt edge of his protective hole to confirm this. He spotted three of the bulbous aircraft on approach. Zawaz snorted. It was odd that the flight wasnât listed on his patrol schedule. He considered alerting his superiors, then thought better of it. What if they were Elites on some secret mission?

No, it was best not to question such things. Be ignored. Live another day. That was his creed.

He nestled back into his hole, reset the motion detector to long range, and prayed it wouldnât go off again. He curled into a tight ball and promptly fell into a deep sleep.

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Fred led their flying-wedge formation. The purple and red fliers arced up and over the treetops of the ridge, gaining as much altitude as the Banshees could manageâabout three hundred meters. As he cleared the top, what he saw made him ease off the throttle.

The valley was ten kilometers across and sloped before him,

thick with Douglas firs that thinned and gave way to trampled fields and the Big Horn River beyond. Camped in the fields were thousands upon thousands of Covenant troops. Their mass covered the entire valley, and thin, smoke-choked sunlight glinted off a sea of red, yellow, and blue armor. They moved in tight columns and swarmed along the riverâs edgeâso many that it looked like someone had kicked over the largest anthill in existence.

And they were building. Hundreds of flimsy white dome-shaped tents were being erected, atmosphere pits for the methane-breathing Grunts. Farther back were the odd polyhedral huts of the Elite units, guarded by a long line of dozens of beetlelike Wraith tanks. Guard towers punctuated the valley; they spiraled up from mobile treaded bases, ten meters tall and topped with plasma turrets.

The rules had indeed changed. In more than a hundred battles Fred had never seen the Covenant set up encampments of such magnitude. All they did was kill.

Floating behind all this activity, almost brushing against the far hills, the Covenant cruiser sat thirty meters off the ground. It looked like a great bloated fish with stubby stabilizing fins. Its gravity lift was in operation, a tube of scintillating energy that moved matter to and from the ground. Stacks of purple crates gently floated down from the craft. In the afternoon light he could see its weapons bristling along its length, casting spiderlike shadows across its hull.

Their Banshees leveled out, and Fred dropped back to tighten his formation with Kelly and Joshua.

He glanced again at the enemy ship and the guard towers. One good hit from those weapons could take them out.

Fred saw other Banshee patrols circling the valley. He frowned. If they passed them, the enemy pilots would almost certainly demand to know their businessâ¦and there was no way of knowing what the established patrol routes were. That meant heâd have to take an alternate flight path: straight down the middle, and straight over the Covenant horde.

Theyâd only need one run to do this. Theyâd probably only *get* one run.

He activated a COM frequency. âGo.â

Kelly hit the acceleration and glided toward the cruiser. Fred

fell in behind her. He armed the fuel rod gun built into the Banshee.

They were six kilometers from the cruiser when Kelly achieved the maximum speed of her flier. Grunts and Jackals in the fields below craned their necks as the Spartans flashed over them.

They had to go faster. Fred felt every Covenant eye watching them. He dived, trading his altitude for acceleration, and Joshua and Kelly did the same.

Communication symbols flashed across his Bansheeâs windshield display. The UNSC software built into their armor worked only with some of the spoken Covenant languagesânot their written words. Odd, curling characters scrolled across the Bansheeâs displays.

Fred hit one of the response symbols.

There was a pause, the display cleared, and dozens more symbols flashed, twice as fast.

Fred clicked the display off.

Three kilometers to go, and his heart beat so hard he heard it thunder in his ears.

Kelly pulled slightly ahead of them. She was now thirty meters off the ground, gaining as much speed as she could, driving straight for the cruiserâs gravity lift.

The nearest guard tower tracked her; its plasma cannon flared and fired.

Kellyâs flier climbed and banked to evade the enemy fire. The bolt of superheated ionized gas brushed against her starboard fuselage. Energy spray melted the Bansheeâs front faring, and her ship slowed.

A dozen plasma turrets turned to track them.

Fred banked and opened fire. Energy bursts from the Bansheeâs primary weapon strafed the guard tower. Joshua did the same, and a river of fire streaked toward the towers.

Fred hit the firing stud for the Bansheeâs heavy weapon, and a sphere of energy arced into the base of the tower. It began a gradual tilt, then collapsed.

Kelly hadnât fired. Fred glanced her way and saw that she now stood in a low crouch atop her racing Banshee. She had one foot under the duct tape that had secured the nuke and now held the bomb in her hand, cocking it back to throw.

A shard of jagged crystal, a round from a Covenant needler, pinged off Fredâs port shield. He snapped a look below.

Covenant Grunts and Jackals boiled in agitationâa hundred badly aimed shots arced up after him; glistening clouds of crystalline needles and firefly plasma bolts swarmed through the air and chipped away at his Bansheeâs fuselage.

Fred jinked his Banshee left and right, and dodged plasma bolts from the three guard towers tracking him. He lined up for a second strafing run, and the Bansheeâs lighter energy weapons sent Grunts scattering.

A hundred meters to go.

Kelly leaned back, coiled her body, and readied to throw the nuclear device as if it were a shotput.

The Covenant cruiser came to life, and its weapons tracked the Banshees. A dozen fingers of plasma ripped the air; white-blue arcs of fire reached for them.

One bolt connected with Joshuaâs vehicle. The Bansheeâs improvised shields overloaded and vanished. The canards of the flier melted and bent. The alien flier lurched into a spin as its control surfaces warped, and Joshua fell behind Fred and Kelly just as they entered the gravity lift of the craft.

Fred keyed his COM to raise Joshua but got only static. Time seemed to slow inside the beam of purple light that ferried goods and troops to and from the belly of the ship. The strange glow surrounded them and made his skin tingle as if it were asleep.

Their Banshees rose toward an opening in the underside of the carrier. They werenât riding into the ship, though; they were traveling too fast and would cross the beam before they were three quarters of the way to the top.

Fred snapped around. He didnât see Joshua anywhere. Plasma beams hit the well and were deflected as if it were a giant glass lens.

Kelly hurled the nuke straight up into the gullet of the cruiser.

Fred wrenched the Bansheeâs controls and arced the craft under the edge of the ship; Kelly was right behind him. The light vanished, and they emerged on the far side of the Covenant vessel.

Behind them, distorted through the gravity lift, Fred saw Covenant troops firing their weapons into the sky. He heard ten

thousand voices screaming for blood.

Fred pinged Joshua on the COM, but his acknowledgment light remained dark.

He wanted to slow and turn back for him, but Kelly dived, accelerating toward the ground, and she entered the forest that carpeted the mountainside. Fred followed her. They were scant meters above the ground; they dodged trees and blasted through tangles of foliage. A handful of stray shots flashed overhead. They flew at top speed and didnât look back.

They emerged from the tree line and over the powdered snow of the mountaintop. They arced over a granite ridge, came about, and throttled back. The Banshees drifted slowly to the ground.

The sky turned white. Fredâs faceplate polarized to its darkest setting. Thunder rolled though his body. Fire and molten metal blossomed over the ridge, boiled skyward, and rained back into the valley. The granite top of the intervening mountain shattered into dust and the snow on their side melted in muddy rivulets.

Fredâs visor slowly depolarized.

Kelly leaned across her Banshee. Blood oozed from her armorâs left shoulder joint. She fumbled for her helmet seal, caught it, and peeled it off her head. âDid we get âem?â she panted. Blood foamed from the corner of her mouth.

âI think so,â Fred told her.

She looked around. âJoshua?â

Fred shook his head. âHe got hit on the way in.â

It had been easy for him to fly into the face of certain death moments ago. Saying those words was a hundred times harder.

Kelly slumped and dropped her head back against her Banshee.

âStay here, Iâm going up to take a look.â Fred powered up his Banshee and rose parallel with the ridgeline. He nudged the craft up a little farther and got his first look into the valley.

It was a sea of flame. Hundreds of fires dotted the cracked, glassy ground. Where the Big Horn River had snaked along, there was now only a long steaming furrow. There was no trace of the cruiser or the Covenant troops that had filled the valley moments ago. All that remained was a field of smoldering, twisted bone and metal. At the edge of this carnage stood blackened sticksâthe remnants of the forestâall leaning away from the center of the explosion.

Ten thousand Covenant deaths. It wasnât worth losing Joshua or any of the other Spartans, but it was something. Perhaps they had bought enough time for the orbital MAC guns to tip the battle overhead in the Fleetâs favor. Maybe their sacrifices would save Reach. That would be worth it.

He looked up into the sky. The steam made it difficult to see anything, but there was motion overhead: Faint shadows glided over the clouds.

Kellyâs Banshee appeared alongside his, and their canards bumped.

The shadows overhead sharpened; three Covenant cruisers broke through the clouds and drifted toward the generator complex. Their plasma artillery flickered and glowed with energy.

Fred snapped open his COM channel and boosted the signal strength to its maximum. âDelta Team: Fall back. Fall back now! â

Static hissed over the channel, and several voices overlapped. He heard one of his Spartansâhe couldnât tell whoâbreak through the static.

âReactor complex seven has been compromised. Weâre falling back. Might be able to save number three.â There was a pause as the speaker shouted orders to someone else: *âSet off those charges now!â*

Fred switched to FLEETCOM and broadcast: âBe advised, *Pillar of Autumn,* groundside reactors are being taken. Orbital guns at risk. Nothing we can do. Too many. Weâll have to use the nukes. Be advised, orbital MAC guns will most likely be neutralized. *Pillar of Autumn,* do you read? Acknowledge.â

More voices crowded the channel, and Fred thought he heard Admiral Whitcombâs voice, but whatever orders he issued were incomprehensible. Then there was only static, and then the COM went dead.

The cruisers fired salvos of plasma that burned the sky. Distant explosions thumped, and Fred strained to see if there was any return fireâany sign that his Spartans were fighting or retreating. Their only hope was movement; the enemy firepower would shred a fixed position.

âFall back,â he hissed. âNow, damn it.â

Kelly tapped him on the shoulder and pointed up.

The clouds parted like a curtain drawn as a fireball a hundred meters across roared over their position. He saw the faint outlines of dozens of Covenant battleships in low orbit.

âPlasma bombardment,â Fred whispered.

Heâd seen this before. They all had. When the Covenant conquered a human world they fired their main plasma batteries at the planetâfired until its oceans boiled and nothing was left but a globe of broken glass.

âThatâs it,â Kelly murmured. âWeâve lost. Reach is going to fall.â

Fred watched as the plasma impacted upon the horizon and the sky turned white, then faded to black as millions of tons of ash and debris blotted out the sun.

âMaybe,â Fred said. He gunned his Banshee. âMaybe not. Come on, weâre not done yet.â

Section I
Threshold

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Chapter Five

**1637 Hours, September 22, 2552 (Military Calendar) \
Aboard Longsword Fighter, Soell System,
Halo Debris Field. Three Weeks Later.**

The Master Chief settled into the pilotâs seat of the Longsword attack craft. He didnât fit. The contoured seat had been engineered to mate with a standard-issue Navy flight suit, not the bulky MJOLNIR armor.

He scratched his scalp and breathed deeply. The air tasted oddâit lacked the metallic quality of his suitâs air scrubbers. This was the first quiet moment heâd had to sit, think, and remember. First there was the satisfaction after the successful space op at Reach, which went sour after Linda was killed and the Covenant glassed the planetâ¦and Red Team. Then the time spent in a *Pillar of Autumn* cryotube, the flight from Reach, and the discovery of Halo.

And the Flood.

He stared out from the front viewport and fought down his revulsion at the memory of the Flood outbreak. Whoever had constructed Halo had used it to contain the sentient, virulent xenoform that had nearly claimed them all. The rapidly healing wound in his neck, inflicted by a Flood Infection Form during the final battle on Haloâs surface, still throbbed.

He wanted to forget it allâ¦especially the Flood. Everything inside him ached.

The systemâs moon, Basis, was a silver-gray disk against the darkness of space, and beyond it was the muted purple of the gas giant Threshold. Between them lay a glistening expanse of debrisâmetal, stone, ice, and everything else that had once been Halo.

âScan it again,â the Master Chief told Cortana.

âAlready completed,â her disembodied voice replied. âThereâs *nothing* out there. I told you: just dust and echoes.â

The Master Chiefâs hand curled into a fist, and for a moment he felt the urge to slam it into something. He relaxed, surprised at his frayed temper. Heâd been exhausted in the pastâand without a doubt the fight on Halo had been the most harrowing of his careerâbut heâd never been prone to such outbursts.

The struggle against the Flood must have gotten to him, more than heâd realized.

With effort he banished the Flood from his mind. Either thereâd be time to deal with it laterâ¦or there wouldnât. Worrying about it now served no useful purpose.

âScan the field again,â he repeated.

Cortanaâs tiny holographic figure appeared on the projection pad mounted between the pilotâs and system-ops seats. She crossed her arms over her chest, visibly irritated with the Master Chiefâs request.

âIf you donât find something out there we can use,â he told her, âweâre dead. This ship has no Slipspace drive, and no cryo. Thereâs no way to get back and report. Power, fuel, air, food, waterâwe only have enough for a few hours.

âSo,â he concluded as patiently as he could manage. âScan. Again.â

Cortana sighed explosively, and her hologram dissolved. The scanner panel activated, however, and mathematical symbols crowded the screen.

A moment later the scanner panel dimmed and Cortana said, âThereâs still nothing, Chief. All Iâm picking up is a strong echo from the moonâ¦but there are no transponder signals, and no distress calls.â

âYouâre not doing an active scan?â

Her tiny hologram appeared again, and this time static flashed across her figure. âThere are trillions of objects out there. If you want I can start to scan and identify each individual piece. If we sit here and do nothing else, that would take eighteen days.â

âWhat if someoneâs out there but they turned off their transponder? What if they donât want to be found?â

âThatâs highly unââ Cortana froze for a split second. The static around her vanished, and she stared off into space. âInteresting.â

âWhat?â

Cortana looked distracted, then seemed to snap out of it. âNew data. That signal echoâs getting stronger.â

âMeaning?â

âMeaning,â she replied, âitâs not an echo.â

The scanner panel hummed back to life as Cortana activated the Longswordâs long-range detection gear. âUh-oh,â she said, a moment later.

The Chief peered at the scan panel as Cortana identified the contact. The distinctive, bulbous silhouette of a Covenant cruiser edged into view as it moved around the moonâs far side.

âPower down,â he snapped. âKill everything except passive scanners and minimal power to keep you online.â

The Longsword darkened; Cortanaâs hologram flickered and faded as she killed power flow to the holosystem.

The cruiser moved into the debris field, prowling like a hungry shark. Another cruiser appeared, then another, and then three more.

âStatus?â he whispered, his hands hovering over the weapons controls. âHave they spotted us?â

âTheyâre using the same scanning frequencies as our system,â Cortana said in his helmet speaker. âHow strange. No mention of this phenomenon in any of the UNSC or ONI files on the Covenant. Why do you suppose theyâd use the same frequencies? â

âNever mind that,â the Chief said. âTheyâre here and looking for something. Like I said before, if there are survivors out there, theyâd be powered down.â

âI can listen to their echoes,â Cortana said, her voice flat and oddly procedural. Operating at lower power levels seemed to limit her more colorful behavior. âProcess active: analyzing Covenant signals. Piggybacking their scans. Diverting more runtime to the task. Iâm building a multiplex filtering algorithm. Customizing the current shape-signature recognition software.â

Another ship rounded the horizon of Basis. It was larger than any Covenant ship the Master Chief had seen. It had the sleek three-pronged shape of one of their destroyers, but it must have been three kilometers long. Seven plasma turrets were mounted on universal jointsâenough firepower to gut any ship in the UNSC fleet.

âPicking up encrypted transmissions from new contact,â Cortana whispered. âDescramblingâ¦lots of chatterâ¦orders being given to the cruisers. It appears to be directing the Covenant fleet operations in the system.â

âA flagship,â the Chief murmured. âInteresting.â

âScan still in progress, Chief. Stand by.â

John got out of the sys-ops seat. He had no intention of just âstanding byâ with seven Covenant warships in the system.

He drifted to the aft compartment of the Longsword fighter. Heâd assess what equipment was on board. He might get lucky and find a few of those Shiva nuclear-tipped missiles.

As he had seen when he first boarded the ship, the cryotube had been removed. He wasnât sure why, but maybe, like everything else on the *Pillar of Autumn*, the ship had been stripped down and upgraded for their original high-risk mission.

Where the cryo unit was supposed to be there was a new control panel. The Chief examined it and discovered it was a Moray space-mine laying system. He didnât power it on. The Moray system could dispense up to three dozen free-floating mines. The mines had tiny chemical-fuel drives that allowed them to keep a fixed position or move to track specific targets. These would come in handy.

He moved to the weapons locker and forced it openâit was empty.

The Chief checked his own assault rifle: fully functional, but only thirteen rounds remained in the magazine.

âGot something,â Cortana said.

He returned to the sys-ops seat. âShow me.â

On the smallest viewscreen, a silhouette appeared: a small, bullet-shaped cone with maneuvering thrusters on one end.

âIt could be a cryotube,â Cortana said. âThruster and power packs can be affixed on their aft sections for emergenciesâ¦if a ship has to be abandoned, for example.â

âAnd most of the crew on the *Pillar of Autumn* never had a chance to be revived from cryo,â the Chief said. âThey could have been jettisoned before the ship went down. Move us toward them. Docking thrusters only.â

âCourse plotted,â Cortana said. âThrusters engaged.â

There was a slight acceleration.

âETA twenty minutes, Chief. But given the Covenant cruisersâ current search pattern, I estimate they will encounter the pod in *five* minutes.â

âWe need to move faster,â the Chief told her, âbut without firing the engines. The drive emissions will show up like a flare on their sensors.â

âHang on,â Cortana said. âIâll get us there.â

The Chief donned his helmet and locked its atmosphere seals. Status lights pulsed green. âReady,â he said.

The aft hatch of the Longsword breached and slammed open. There was an explosive sound as the atmosphere vented. The Longsword jumped forward; the Chiefâs head slammed into the back of his helmet.

âAdjusting course,â Cortana said calmly. âETA two minutes.â

âHow are we going to stop?â he asked.

She sighed. âDo I have to think of everything?â The aft hatch resealed, and John heard the faint hiss as the internal compartments pressurized.

One of the sleek Covenant cruisers slowed and turned toward them.

âPicking up increased scanning signal activity and strength,â Cortana reported.

The Chiefâs hand hovered over the weapons system console. It would take several seconds for the weapons to power up. The 110mm rotary cannons could fire immediately, but the missiles would have to wait for their target-lock software to initialize. By then the cruiser, which outgunned them a hundred to one, would turn the Longsword into molten slag.

âAttempting to jam their scanners,â Cortana said. âThat may buy us some time.â

The Covenant cruiser turned away, slowed, and turned back to face the comparatively tiny Longsword. It took no further actionâ¦as if it were waiting for them to get closer.

So far so good. The Chief clenched and unclenched his gauntleted hand. *Weâre not dead yet.*

He glanced at the scan display. The contact resolved into a clearer image: definitely a UNSC cryopod. It tumbled, and he saw that what he thought was a single pod was in fact three of them, affixed side by side.

Three possible survivors out of the *Pillar of Autumn*âs total complement of hundreds. He wished there were more. He wished Captain Keyes were here. In the Chiefâs opinion Keyes had been the most brilliant spatial tactician he had ever encounteredâ¦but even the Captain would have thought twice about approaching seven Covenant warships in a single Longsword.

He risked feeding more shipâs power to Cortanaâs systems. If they were going to make it through this, he needed her as effective as possible.

âNew contact,â Cortana said, interrupting his thoughts. âI

think it is, anyway. Whatever it is, itâs stuck onto a chunk of rock, half a kilometer in diameter. Damn, it just rotated out of my view.â

On the display Cortana replayed a partial silhouette of an oddly angled shape on the surface of the rock. She highlighted its contours, rotated the polygon, and overlaid this onto a schematic of a Pelican dropship.

âMatch with a tolerance of fifty-eight percent,â she said. âThey might have parked there to avoid detection, as you suggested.â

The Chief thought he detected a hint of irritation in her voice, as if she resented him for thinking of something she had not.

âOr,â Cortana continued, âmore likely, the craft merely crashed there.â

âI donât think so.â He pointed at the display. âThe position of that wing indicates itâs nose-outâready for takeoff. If it had crash-landed, it would be faced the other way.â

Another Covenant cruiser moved toward this new ship.

âComing about, Chief,â Cortana told him. âBrace yourself, and then get ready to retrieve the pods.â

The Chief unsnapped his harness and drifted aft. He grabbed a tether and clipped one end to his suit, the other to the bulkhead of the Longsword.

He felt the maneuvering thrusters fire, and the ship rotated 180 degrees.

âDecompression in three seconds,â Cortana said.

The Chief opened the empty weapons locker and climbed partially inside. He braced himself.

Cortana dropped the aft hatch, and the inside of the ship exploded out; the Chief slammed into the door of the locker, denting the centimeter-thick Titanium-A.

He climbed out and Cortana overlaid a blue arrow-shaped NAV point on his heads-up display, indicating the location of the drifting cryopods.

The Chief jumped out of the Longsword.

He floated through space. He was only thirty meters from the pods, but if heâd guessed wrong about his trajectory and missed the target, he wouldnât get a second chance. By the time he reeled himself back to the Longsword and tried again, those Covenant ships were certain to kill them all.

He stretched his arms and hands toward the cylinders. Twenty meters to go.

His approach was off. He shifted his left knee closer to his chest and started a slow tumble.

Ten meters.

His upper body rotated âdownâ relative to the pods. If he spun just right as he passed the cryotubes, it would give him enough extra reach to make contact. He hoped.

He rotated backâ¦almost standing âupâ now.

Three meters.

He stretched his arms until the elbow joints creaked and popped; he stretched his hands, willed his fingers to elongate.

His fingertips brushed against the smooth surface of the leading cryopod. It slid off and over and touched the second pod. He flexed and failed to grab hold. He scratched the surface of the third and final podâhis middle finger hooked on the frame.

His body swung inward, curled, and landed on the pod. He quickly looped his tether through the frame, secured himself to it, and pulled their combined mass back to the Longsword.

âHurry, Chief,â Cortana said over the COM. âWeâve got trouble.â

The Chief saw exactly what the trouble was: The engines of two Covenant cruisers flared electric blue as they accelerated toward the Longsword. The plasma and laser weapons along their hulls warmed from red to orange as they readied to fire.

He pulled as fast as he could, making minor adjustments with the muscles in his braced legs so his motions didnât send them into a tumble in the zero gravity.

The Longsword was a sitting duck for those Covenant cruisers. Cortana couldnât fire the engines until he got on board. Even if he and the pods survived the thruster wash, any evasive maneuver Cortana made would snap him and his cargo like the end of a whip.

The Covenant ships were within firing range, lined up perfectly to destroy the Longsword.

Three missiles streaked though space, impacting on the starboard side of the lead Covenant ship. The explosion splashed harmlessly across its shield, which shimmered silver as it dissipated the energy.

The Chief turned his head and saw the Pelican blast off from

the asteroid where it had been hiding. It rocketed on a perpendicular course toward the two Covenant ships.

The cruisers came about, apparently more interested in hunting live prey than the motionless Longsword.

The Chief gave one final yank on the tether. He and the pods flew through the aft hatch and crashed into the deck of the Longsword.

Cortana immediately sealed the hatch and fired the engines.

The Chief climbed into the system-ops seat just as they accelerated and turned toward the cruisers. He activated the weapons systems.

The two Covenant cruisers powered their engines and pursued the Pelican, but it had entered a dense region of the debris field, dodged a chunk of metal and rock, dived over an iceball, and charged through clouds of shattered alien metal. The Covenant fired: Energy blasts impacted on the debris and missed the Pelican.

âWhoeverâs piloting that Pelican knows their stuff,â Cortana said.

âWe owe them a favor.â John fired the Longswordâs guns, and tiny silver dots punctuated the trailing Covenant cruiserâs shields. âLetâs settle that debt.â

âYou realize,â Cortana said, âthat we really canât damage those Covenant ships.â

The cruiser slowed and turned toward them.

âWeâll see about that. Get me a firing solution for the missiles. I want them to target their plasma turrets just before they fire. They have to drop a section of their shields for a fraction of a second.â

âWorking,â Cortana replied. âWithout precise data, however, Iâll have to base my calculations on several assumptions.â A string of mathematics appeared on the weapons-ops panel. âGive me fire control.â

John punched the auto override on the firing systems. âItâs yours,â he said.

The Covenant cruiserâs plasma turrets turned to track them as the ship came to bear. They warmed, and Cortana fired all the Longswordâs ASGM-10 missiles.

White vapor trails snaked toward the target.

âLetâs move!â the Chief said.

The Longsword accelerated into the debris field, following the Pelicanâs path. The aft camera displayed the missiles racing to their target. Antimissile laser fire stabbed though space, and three of the missiles exploded into red fireballs. The Covenantâs plasma turret glowed white hotâabout to fireâwhen the last missile impacted. The explosion smeared across the hull.

At first the Chief thought it had hit the shield, but then he saw that the explosion was *inside* the shimmering envelope of energy. The plasma turrets fired; their energy was immediately absorbed into the cloud of dust and vapor around the ship. Dull red plasma ballooned inside the cruiserâs shield, obscuring its sensors. The ship listed to port, momentarily blind.

âThat should keep them busy for a while,â Cortana said.

The Longsword arced under a half-kilometer-wide metal plateâjust as a plasma bolt impacted and boiled the surface, sending the plate sputtering and spinning through space.

âOr not,â Cortana muttered. âBetter let me drive.â

The autopilot engaged, and the controls jerked out of the Chiefâs hand. The Longswordâs afterburners kicked in, and it accelerated toward a field of tumbling rocks. Cortana rolled and pitched, keeping the hull mere meters from the jagged surfaces.

The Chief hung on to the seat with one hand and pulled his harness tight with the other. He moved the scanner display to the center viewscreen and saw the two nearest Covenant cruisers vectored toward his and the Pelicanâs position. The two UNSC ships might evade and dodge through the debris field for a few minutes, but soon their fuel would be exhausted, and the Covenant would move in for the kill.

And where could they really run to, anyway? Neither ship had Shaw-Fujikawa Translight Engines, so they were stuck in this system and the Covenant knew it. They could afford to take their time and play with their prey before they pounced.

The Chief performed a sweep scan of the system looking for somethingâanything to give him a tactical advantage. No, thinking of tactics was going to get him killed. There was no *tactical* advantage he could gain that would give him a victory in this mismatch. He had to change the rulesâchange his *strategy*.

He scanned the massive Covenant flagshipâthat was the key. Thatâs how heâd be able to turn the tables on the enemy.

He keyed the COM system and hailed the Pelican. âThis is

Master Chief SPARTAN-One-One-Seven. Recognition code Tango Alpha Three Four Zero. Copy.â

âCopy,â a womanâs voice answered. *âWarrant Officer Polaski here.â* Other voices argued in the background. *âDamn good to hear you, Chief.â*

âPolaski, proceed at maximum burn to this position.â He dropped a NAV point on the display directly on the Covenant flagship. He included an exit vector indicating a rough course.

There was silence over the COM.

âCopy, Polaski?â

âI copy. Plotting course now, Chief.â The voices arguing in the background became loud and more strained. *âI hope you know what youâre doing. Polaski out.â* The channel snapped off.

âGet us there, Cortana,â he said, tapping the NAV point. âAs fast as you can make this thing fly.â

The Longsword rolled right and pitched toward the moon, Basis. The chiefâs safety harness groaned as gee forces increased.

âYou *do* know what youâre doing?â Cortana asked. âI mean, weâre headed straight toward the largest and most dangerous Covenant ship in this system. I assume this is part of some daring and brutally simplistic plan youâve cooked up?â

âYes,â the Chief replied.

âOh, good. Hang on,â Cortana said. The Longsword rolled to port and dived under a rock. An explosion detonated aft of the ship. âLooks like your âplanâ has gotten their attention. Iâm reading all six Covenant cruisers moving to overtake us at flank speed.â

âAnd the Pelican?â

âStill there,â Cortana reported. âTaking heavy fire. But on trajectory to the NAV pointâ¦moving slower than us, of course.â

âAdjust our speed so we arrive at the same time. When youâre in range for a secure system link, let me know.â

The Longsword decelerated; it shuddered to starboard and then to port, and laser fire flashed along either side.

âYou never told me,â Cortana said in a voice that was equal parts irritation and calm indifference, âprecisely what your plan is.â

âSomething Captain Keyes would approve of.â The Chief summoned the navigation console on the main display. âIf we survive long enough, I want a course from hereââhe tapped the

NAV point over the flagshipâ€”into the gravity well of Basis to slingshot us around.â

âDone,â Cortana replied. âI stillâHey, theyâve stopped firing.â

The Chief tapped the aft camera. The six cruisers continued their pursuit, but the tips of their weapons cooled as they powered down. âI was counting on this. Weâre on the same line of fire as their flagship. They wonât shoot.â

âPelican now twelve hundred kilometers and closing. Within range for system link.â

The Chief hailed the Pelican. âPolaski, release your controls. Weâre taking over.â

âChief?â

âEstablish encrypted system link. Acknowledge.â

A long pause, then, *âRoger.â*

Cortanaâs hologram appeared on the tiny protection pad. She appeared to listen intently for a moment, and then declared, âGot them.â

âSynchronize our courses, Cortana. Put us right on top of the Pelican.â

âManeuvering to intercept the Pelican. Five hundred kilometers to flagship.â

âPrepare to alter our course, Cortana, as we pass the flagship. Also get ready to direct all scanners at the flagship if we pass.â

â€âIfâ?â Cortana asked.

The flagshipâs turrets turned to bear on the Longsword and Pelican. They glowed like angry eyes in the dark.

âThree hundred kilometers.â

Light sparkled along the length of the Covenant craft as it prepared to fire; dull red plasma gathered; three torpedoes extruded and raced toward them.

âEvasivâ€â the Chief said.

Cortana banked hard port, starboard, and then hit the afterburners and pulled up. Streaks of hellfire brushed close to the hulls of the Longsword and Pelicanâthen were gone behind them.

The Chief had hoped for this: Their extreme oblique approach angle combined with their speed made them hard to hit, even for the notoriously accurate Covenant plasma weapons.

âTen kilometers,â Cortana announced. âScanning in burst

mode.â

They flashed over the three-kilometer-long ship in the blink of an eye. The Chief saw gun turrets straining to track their approach. The alien craft had sleek lines, relatively flat top to bottom, but it curved from stem to stern into three distinct sections. Along its hull ran glowing blue conduits of superheated plasma; surrounding the ship was a faint shimmer of silver energy shields.

He eased back into his seat. The Chief hadnât realized that heâd been holding his breath, and he exhaled. âGood,â he said. âVery good.â

âBurning into a high slingshot orbit,â Cortana announced.

The Longswordâs engines rumbled. The acceleration played hell with the Chiefâs inner ear. He wasnât certain for a moment which way was up.

âBring us closer to the Pelican,â he said. âRight on top. Give me a hard dock on its top access hatch.â

Cortana set her hands on her hips and frowned. âReadjusting burn parameters. But you know a linked-ship configuration during an orbital burn is not stable.â

âWe wonât be linked long,â he said and slipped out of his harness. He drifted aft, pulled himself down to the floor and opened the Longswordâs access hatch. Green lights on the intervening pressure door winked on in succession. He removed the safeties and popped the seal.

A hand reached up from the other side. John pulled the person through.

The shock only lasted a moment. Johnâs reflexes kicked inâhe grabbed a handful of the manâs uniform, kicked the hatch shut, and propelled both of them against the hull. With a lightning-quick motion, he drew the newcomerâs pistol and aimed it squarely at the manâs forehead.

âYou were dead,â the Chief said. âI *saw* you die. On Jenkinsâs mission record. The Flood got you.â

The black man smiled a set of perfect white teeth. âThe Flood? Hell, Chief, itâll take more than that pack of walking alien horror-show freaks to take out Sergeant A. J. Johnson.â

Chapter Six

**1710 Hours, September 22, 2552 (Military Calendar) \
Aboard Longsword Fighter, Soell System,
Halo Debris Field.**

The Master Chief held on to the shipâs frame with one hand so he wouldnât float away in zero gee. With the other hand he pressed the pistol deeper into Johnsonâs forehead.

The Sergeantâs smile faded, but there was not a trace of fear in his dark eyes. He snorted a laugh. âI get it: You think Iâm infected. Well, Iâm not. Thisââhe patted his chestââis one hundred percent grade-A Marineâ¦and nothinâ else.â

The Chief eased his stance but didnât lower the gun. âExplain how thatâs possible.â

âThey got us all right, those little mushroom-shaped infectious bastards,â Johnson said. âThey ambushed me, Jenkins, and Keyes.â He paused at the Captainâs name, then shook his head and went on. âThey swarmed all over us. Jenkins and Keyes were takenâ¦but I guess I didnât taste too good.â

âThe Flood doesnât âtasteâ anything,â Cortana interjected. âThe Infection Forms rewrite a victimâs cellular structure and convert him into a Combat Form, then later a Carrier Formâan incubator for more Infection Forms. Based on what weâve seen, they certainly donât just decide to pass up a victim.â

The Sergeant shrugged. He fished into his pocket, found the remaining stub of a chewed cigar, and stuck it in the corner of his mouth. âWell, *Iâve* seen different. They âpassed me upâ like I was undercooked spinach at a turkey dinner.â

âCortana,â the Chief asked. âIs it possible?â

âItâs *possible*,â she carefully replied. âBut itâs also highly unlikely.â She paused for two heartbeats, and then added, âAccording to the readings from the Sergeantâs biomonitors, his story checks out. I canât be one hundred percent positive until heâs been cleared in a medical suite, but preliminary findings indicate that he is clean of any Flood parasitic infection. Heâs obviously not a mindless, alien killing machine.â

âAll right.â The Chief clicked the pistolâs safety to âonâ then

flipped the pistol around and handed it back to the Sergeant, grip first. âBut Iâm having you checked inside and out the first chance we get. We canât risk letting the Flood infection spread.â

âI hear you, Master Chief. Looking forward to those Navy nurses. Nowââ The Sergeant pushed off the hull and drifted toward the hatch. ââletâs get the rest of the crew on board.â He hesitated by the cryotubes. âI see you already picked up a few stragglers.â

âTheyâll have to wait,â the Chief said. âItâll take half an hour to thaw them out without risking hypothermic shock. We donât have that much time left before we reengage the Covenant.â

âReengage,â the Sergeant said, savoring the word. He smiled. âGood. For a second I thought we were running away from a perfectly good fight.â The Sergeant opened the hatch to the Pelican.

The barrel of an MA5B assault rifle extended through the opening. The Sergeant reached down and pulled it up.

A Marine Corporal drifted though the hatch. The name stitched on his uniform read LOCKLEAR. He was tanned, shaved bald, and had a wild look in his clear blue eyes. He retrieved his gun from the Sergeant and swept the interior with the point of his weapon. âClear!â he shouted back down into the Pelican.

âAt ease, Corporal,â the Master Chief said.

The Corporalâs eyes finally locked onto the Chief. He shook his head in disbelief. âA Spartan,â he muttered. âFigures. Outta the frigginâ frying panââ

The Master Chief spotted the Marineâs shoulder patch: the gold comet insigne of the Orbital Drop Shock Troops. The ODST, more colorfully known as âHelljumpers,â were notorious for their tenacity in a fight.

Locklear must have been one of Major Silvaâs boys, which explained the young Marineâs general hostility. Silva was ODST to the bone, and during the action on Halo had been decidedly negative about the SPARTAN-IIs in generalâ¦and the Chief in particular.

Another man gripped the edge of the hatch and pulled himself up. He had a plasma pistol strapped to his side and wore a crisp black uniform. His red hair was neatly slicked back, and his eyes took in the Chief without obvious surprise. He wore the black enameled bars of a First Lieutenant.

âSir!â The Chief snapped off a crisp salute.

âAdjusting burn and angle,â Cortana announced. The Longsword and Pelican tilted relative to the moon, Basis, on the viewscreen. âThat should give you a little more than one gee on the deck.â

The lieutenant settled to the floor and lazily returned the salute. âIâm Haverson,â he said. He looked John over with interest. âYou are the Master Chief, SPARTAN 117.â

âYes, sir.â The Chief was surprised. Most people, even experienced officers, had difficulty distinguishing one Spartan from another. How had this young officer so quickly identified him?

The Chief saw the round insigne on the manâs shoulderâthe black and silver eagle wings over a trio of stars. Inscribed above the eagle wings were the Latin words SEMPER VIGILANSâEver Vigilant.

Haverson was with the Office of Naval Intelligence.

âGood,â Haverson said. He glanced quickly at Locklear and Johnson. âWith you, Chief, we might have a chance.â He reached into the hatch and pulled another person onto the Longsword.

This last person was a woman, and she wore the flight suit of a pilot. Her dirty blond hair was tucked into a cap. She saluted the Chief. âPetty Warrant Officer Polaski, requesting permission to come aboard, Master Chief.â

âGranted,â he said and returned her salute.

Stenciled onto her coveralls was a flaming fist over a red bullâs-eye, the insigne of the Twenty-third Naval Air Squadron. Although the Chief had never met Polaski, she was from the same chalk as Captain Carol Rawley, callsign âFoehammer.â If Polaski was anything like Foehammer, she would be a skilled and fearless pilot.

âSo whatâs the story?â Locklear demanded. âWe got something to shoot here?â

âAt ease, Marine,â the Sergeant growled. âUse that stuffing between your ears for something besides keeping your helmet on. Notice weâre not floating? Feel those gee forces? This ship is in a slingshot orbit. Weâre coming around the moon for another crack at the Covenant.â

âThatâs correct,â the Chief said.

âOur first priority should be to escape,â Haverson said and his thin brows knitted in frustration, ânot to blindly engage the Covenant. We have valuable intelligence on the enemy, and on Halo. Our first priority should be to reach UNSC-controlled space.â

âThat was my intention, sir,â the Chief replied. âBut neither this Longsword nor your Pelican is equipped with Shaw-Fujikawa engines. Without a jump to Slipspace, it would take years to return.â

Haverson sighed. âThat does limit our options, doesnât it?â He turned his back to the Chief and paced, deep in thought.

The Master Chief respected the chain of command, which meant that he had to obey Lieutenant Haverson. But, officer or not, the Spartan had never liked it when people turned their backs to him. And he certainly didnât like the way Haverson assumed he was in charge.

The Chief had already gotten his orders, and he intended to follow themâwhether or not Haverson approved.

âPardon me, sir,â the Chief said. âI must point out that while you are the ranking officer, I am on a classified mission of the highest priority. My orders come directly from High Command.â

âMeaning?â

âMeaning,â John continued, âI have tactical command of this crew, these shipsâ¦and *you*. Sir.â

Haverson turned, his expression dark. The Lieutenantâs mouth opened as if he were going to say something. He closed his mouth and looked the Chief over. A faint smile flickered over his thin lips. âOf course. I am well aware of your mission, Chief. Iâll do anything I can to assist.â

He knew about the Spartanâs original mission to capture a Covenant Prophet? What was an ONI officer doing here anyway?

âSo whatâs the plan?â Locklear asked. âSlingshot orbitâthen what? We just going to talk all day, Chief?â

âNo,â the Chief replied.

He glanced at Polaski and the Sergeant. He could count on her, and though he was suspicious of exactly how Sergeant Johnson had avoided falling to the Flood, he was willing to give the man the benefit of the doubt. Haverson? He wouldnât trust him, but the man knew what was at stake, and he wouldnât interfere. Probably. Locklear was another story, though.

The ODST was coiled and ready to pounceâ¦or come apart like an antipersonnel mine. Some men broke under pressure and wouldnât fight. Some snapped and disregarded their own and their teamâs safety for blind revenge. Add that to the Helljumperâs fierce pride and one had a volatile mix. The Chief had to establish his authority over the man.

âGet onto the Pelican,â the Chief told him. âWe only have a few minutes while weâre on the far side of this moon. Grab anything we can use: extra weapons, ammunition, grenades. Keep linked up to my COM so you can hear the briefing.â

Locklear stood there, glared into the Chiefâs faceplate, and tensed.

Sergeant Johnson opened his mouth, but the Chief made a subtle cutting gesture with his hand. The Sergeant kept whatever he had to say to himself.

The Master Chief took a step closer to Locklear. âWas my order unclear, *Corporal*?â

Locklear swallowed. The blue fire in his eyes dulled and he looked away. âNo.â His body slumped and he shouldered his rifle, accepting, for now, the Master Chiefâs authority. âIâm on it, Master Chief.â He went to the hatch and dropped into the Pelican.

To say this team was mismatched for a high-risk insertion op was an understatement.

âSo how do we get a Shaw-Fujikawa drive?â Polaski asked.

âWe donât,â John replied. âBut we go after the next best thing.â He moved to the ops console and tapped the display. The scan of the Covenant flagship appeared on the viewscreen. âThis is our objective.â

Haverson frowned. âChief, if we approach that ship weâll be blown out of the sky before we can even think about engaging them.â

âNormally, yes,â the Chief replied. âBut weâre going to rig the Pelican as a fireshipâwe load it with Moray mines and send it out ahead of us. Weâll have to remote-pilot the Pelican, but it can be accelerated past the point where a crew would black out. Itâll draw enemy fire, drop a few mines, and let us slip by.â

Polaskiâs expression hardened into a frown.

âThere a problem, Warrant Officer?â

âNo, Master Chief. I just hate to lose a good ship. That bird

got us off Halo in one piece.â

He understood. Pilots got attached to their ships. They gave them names and human personalities. The Chief, however, never fell into that trap; he had long ago learned that any equipment was expendable. Except, maybe, Cortana.

âSo we get close to the flagship,â Haverson said and crossed his arms over his chest. âAre we going nose to nose with a ship with a thousand times our firepower? Or are you planning another flyby?â

âNeither.â The Chief pointed to the flagshipâs fighter launch bay. âThatâs our LZ.â

Polaski squinted at the comparatively tiny opening in the belly of the flagship. âThatâs a hell of a window to hit coming in this fast, butââshe bit her lower lip, calculatingââtechnically possible in a Longsword.â

âTheyâll launch Seraph fighters to engage the Pelican and the Longsword,â the Chief said, âand to do that, theyâll have to drop that section of their shields. We get in, neutralize the crew, and we have a ship with Slipspace capability.â

âRock ânâ roll!â Locklear yelled over the COM. *âPenetrate and annihilate!â*

Sergeant Johnson chewed on his cigar as he considered the plan.

âNo one has ever captured a Covenant ship,â Haverson whispered. âThe few times weâve had one of them beaten and in a position to surrender, theyâve self-destructed.â

âThereâs no choice,â the Chief said. He looked over Polaski, Johnson, and finally Haverson. âUnless anyone has a better plan?â

They were silent.

âAnything to add, Cortana?â he asked.

âOur exit orbit burn leaves us low on fuel and traveling at high velocity on an intercept course with the flagship. There are overlapping fields of enemy fire on our approach vector. We have to decelerate and dodge simultaneously. That will be tricky.â

âPolaski will be on that.â The Chief turned to her.

âPilot a Longsword?â Polaski slowly nodded, and there was a gleam in her green eyes that hadnât been there a second ago. âItâs been a while, but yes, Master Chief. I am one hundred and

ten percent on it.â She moved to the pilotâs seat and strapped herself in.

âWith all due respect to Miss Polaskiâs skill,â Cortana said, âallow me to point out that I process information a million times faster andââ

âI need you to link with the flagshipâs intraship battlenet,â the Chief cut in. âWhen weâre close youâll need to shut down its weapons. Jam its communications.â

âSending an unescorted lady ahead to do your dirty work?â Cortana sighed. âI suppose Iâm the only one who can.â

âLieutenant Haverson,â the Chief said, âIâll need you to program the Moray mines to release and attach onto the Pelican before we exit this orbit. Set half for detonation on impact. Program the rest to detach and track any enemy ship on our approach.â

Haverson nodded and settled into the ops station next to Polaski.

Two crates and a duffel pushed through the open access tunnel to the Pelican. Locklear emerged from the opening and sealed the hatch. âThatâs it, Chief,â he said. âAn HE Pistol, two extra MA5Bs, one M90 Close Assault Shotgun, and a crate or so of frag grenades. About a dozen clips for the riflesâonly a few shells for the shotgun, though.â

The Chief took four grenades and a half dozen clips for his assault rifle. He ejected his weaponâs nearly spent magazine and slapped a full one into place with a satisfying *clack*.

The Sergeant grabbed ammo, an MA5B, and three grenades.

âOrbital exit burn in ten seconds,â Polaski said.

âDog the rest of that,â the Chief told Locklear. âAnd brace yourself.â

Locklear secured the collection of weapons and ordnance in a duffel bag, looped it around his neck, and then found a hand-hold. Sergeant Johnson leaned against the cryopods. The Master Chief grabbed the bulkhead.

âReleasing Pelican,â Polaski said. There was a *thump* from beneath the hull. âPelican away.â

âPelican autopilot programmed,â Cortana said.

âMoray mines attached and armed,â Haverson added.

Polaski said, âExit burn in threeâ¦twoâ¦one. *Burn!*â

The Longswordâs engine roared to life, the hull creaked with

stress, and everyone leaned against the acceleration.

The Pelican pulled ahead, rounded the horizon of the moon first, and arced back into the debris field. As the Longsword followed, the light struck the surface of the moon just right and the Chief saw meteors rain upon the planetoid, leaving craters and tiny puffs of dust as they impacted.

Polaski snapped the display port camera centered on the Covenant cruisers. âThey were waiting for us,â she cried. âEvasive maneuvers.â The Pelican rolled to starboard. âAccelerating to the flagshââ

The flagship was close. Too close. It must have anticipated their orbital trajectory. But it hadnât counted on them turning straight toward it. If they hadnât, the flagship would have been in a perfect perpendicular firing position.

âPelican now two hundred kilometers in the lead,â Polaski said.

The bulky craft drew fire from the cruisers. Smoke trailed from its hull, and bits of the empty ship were vaporized.

âMines away,â Haverson announced. âPlugging coordinates and trajectories into NAV, Polaski. Donât run them over.â

âRoger,â she said. âHang onâweâre going in.â

âI hate this crap,â Locklear muttered. âShips shooting each other, fire so thick you could walk on it to the LZ, and me sittinâ here not able to do a damn thing but hang on and wonder when Iâm going to get blown up.â

The Chief said nothing, but he agreed. Despite the ODSTâs foul disposition, he shared his uneasiness with space combat.

âAmen,â Sergeant Johnson added. âNow shut up and let the lady drive.â He removed a mission record unit from his pocket and inserted a chip. The screen blanked; a rhythmic cacophony blasted from its single tiny speaker.

The Chief recognized the sound as âflipâ musicâa descendant of some centuries-old noise called âmetal.â The Sarge had peculiar tastes, to say the least.

âJust shoot me now, Sarge,â Locklear protested, âand get it over with. Donât torture me with that crap first.â

âSuck it up, Marine. This is a *classic*.â

âSoâs a mercy killing.â

Polaski continued to evade, and the Longsword rolled and jinked port and starboard. She sent the ship into a double barrel

roll to dodge a plasma torpedo fired from the flagship.

âShow-off,â Cortana muttered in the Chiefâs helmet speaker.

âConnecting to the Covenant battlenet,â Cortana announced over the ship COM. âAccessing their weapons systems. Stand by.â

Ahead, the Pelican intercepted a second torpedo and burst into flames, vaporized, and smeared across the night as a cloud of sparkling ionized metal.

The flagship appeared on the forward viewscreenâno larger than a dinner plate.

âNo more time to play around,â Polaski muttered. She hit the afterburners and rocketed toward the flagship.

The sudden acceleration sent the Chief and Sergeant Johnson bouncing to the aft of the Longsword. Locklear still hung on to the frame, now nearly horizontal.

âThere is now insufficient distance to decelerate and make a soft landing inside the flagship launch bay,â Cortana warned.

âReally?â Polaski replied, irritated. âNo wonder they call you âsmartâ AIs.â She tugged her cap lower over her eyes. â*Iâll* do the flying. *You* concentrate on getting those weapons offline.â

âTheyâre launching fighters,â Haverson warned. On the viewscreen the Covenant flagship now filled half the display, and six Seraph fighters emerged from the belly of the massive ship. âIâve still got active signals from twenty of the Moray mines. Their momentum is carrying them within range. Trackingâ¦locked onâ¦maneuvering.â Tiny puffs of fire overlapped the teardrop-shaped Seraph fighters as they exploded. Haverson laughed. âBullâs-eye!â

âForward weapons systems and shields are disabled,â Cortana said.

âThe doors are open,â Polaski murmured. âWeâre invited in. Itâd be damn impolite to say no.â

The flagship filled the display.

âCollision imminent,â Cortana warned.

Sergeant Johnson got to his feet. The Chief knew better and stayed where he was on the deck. He grabbed on to the Sergeantâs leg.

Polaski cut the engines and hit the maneuvering thrusters. The Longsword spun 180 degrees. With the ship now pointed backward, she pushed the throttle to maximum, and the engines

thundered in full overload. The hull strained against the sudden reverse deceleration.

The Chief hung on to the floor with one hand; with the other he held on to the Sergeant and kept him from flying across the ship.

Polaski changed the viewscreen to a split viewâfore and aft. She maneuvered with the shipâs thrusters, adjusting their approach to the launch bay opening. Onscreen the small opening grew larger alarmingly fast. âHang onâhang on!â

The engines whined and the ship slowedâ¦but it wasnât going to be enough.

They entered the launch bay at three hundred meters per second. Flames from the Longswordâs engines washed over Grunt technicians as they vainly attempted to scramble out of the way. Their methane-filled atmosphere tanks popped like firecrackers.

Polaski cut the power. The ship slammed into the wall.

The Master Chief, Sergeant Johnson, and Locklear crashed into the pilotâs and ops seats in a heap.

Grunts approached the ship with plasma pistols drawn, the weapons glowing green as the aliens overcharged them. Covenant Engineers struggled to put out fires and repair burst conduits.

âShield reenergizing in place over the launch bay,â Cortana announced. âExternal atmosphere stabilizing. Please feel free to get up and move around the cabin.â

Locklear scrambled to his feet. âYeah!â he whooped. The young Helljumper yanked his MA5Bâs charging lever and racked a round into the chamber. âLetâs rock!â

âGood work, people,â the Chief said, standing. He readied his own assault rifle. âBut that was just the easy part.â

Chapter Seven

**1750 Hours, September 22, 2552 (Military Calendar) \
Aboard Unidentified Covenant Flagship,
Soell System, Halo Debris Field.**

Plasma bolts impacted on the Longswordâs hull and splashed across the windshield. The packets of glowing energy sizzled across the cockpit and etched cloudy, molten trails into the glass.

A legion of Grunts hunkered behind docked Seraph fighters and fuel pods. Some darted in and out of cover and fired ghostly green bolts of plasma at the Longsword.

âI got âem,â Polaski said and flipped a switch.

The Longswordâs landing gear deployed and raised the craft a meter off the floor. âGuns clear,â Polaski announced. ââBye, boys.â

She brought up a targeting reticle and swept it around the bay. A hail of 120mm rounds tore through the Gruntsâ cover. Fuel pods and unshielded fighters detonated and sent metal fragments and alien soldiers hurtling to the deck. The air exploded into roiling flame, which billowed toward the ceiling and then subsided. Pools of burning fuel and the charred bodies of Grunts and Covenant Engineers littered the launch bay.

âFire suppression system activating,â Cortana said.

Jets of gray mist blew down from above. The fires intensified for a moment, then guttered and went out.

âIs there atmosphere in the bay?â the Chief asked.

âScanning,â Cortana replied. âTraces of ash, some contamination from the melted ship hulls, and a lot of smoke, but the air in the bay is breathable, Chief.â

âGood.â He turned to the others. âWeâre going in. Iâll lead. Locklear, youâre up with me. Sergeant, youâve got the rear.â

âYouâll need to take me, too,â Cortana said. âIâve pulled a schematic of this ship to navigate, but the engineering controls have been manually locked down. Iâll need direct access to this shipâs command data systems.â

The Chief hesitated. His armor allowed an AI like Cortana to tag along stored in a special crystal layer. On Halo, Cortana had

been an invaluable tactical asset.

Still, she also used part of his armorâs neural interface for processing purposes, literally harnessing parts of the Chiefâs brain. And after coming out of Haloâs computer system, sheâd been actingâ¦twitchy.

He put his discomfort aside. If Cortana turned into a liability, heâd pull the plug.

âStand by,â he said. He punched a key on the computer terminal and dumped Cortana to a data chip. A moment later the terminal pulsed green.

He removed the chip and slotted it in the back of his helmet. There was a moment of vertigo, and then the familiar mercury-and-ice sensation flooded his skull as Cortana interfaced.

âStill plenty of room in here, I see,â she said.

He ignored her customary quip and nodded at Johnson and Locklear. âLetâs go.â

Sergeant Johnson hit the door release, and the side hatch slid open. Locklear shouldered his rifle and poured fire through the opening. A pair of Grunts who had crouched near the Longsword to protect themselves from the fire flew backward onto the deck. Phosphorescent blood pooled beneath their prone forms.

The Chief dived through the open hatch and rolled to his feet; his motion tracker picked up three targets to his side. He whirled about and saw a trio of Covenant Engineers. He removed his finger from the weaponâs trigger. Engineers were no threat.

The odd, meter-high creatures hovered above the deck, using bladders of some lighter-than-air gas produced by their bodies. Their tentacles and feelers probed a tangle of fuel lines, quickly repairing the pipes and pumps.

âFunny that thereâs no welcoming committee yet,â Cortana whispered. âI looked over this shipâs personnel roster: three thousand Covenant, mostly Engineers. Thereâs a light company of Grunts, and only a hundred Elites.â

â*Only* a hundred?â the Chief muttered.

He waved his team forward toward a heavy door at the back of the launch bay. The air was full of smoke and fire-suppressing mist, which reduced visibility to a dozen meters.

The rattle of assault rifle fire echoed through the bay. The Chief spun to his right and brought his own rifle to bear.

Locklear stood over the twitching corpses of the Engineers.

He fired another burst into the fallen aliens.

âDonât waste your ammunition, Corporal,â the Sergeant said. âThey may be ugly, but theyâre harmless.â

âTheyâre harmless *now*, Sarge,â Locklear replied. He wiped a spatter of alien blood from his cheek and smirked.

The Chief tended to agree with Locklearâs threat analysis of the Covenant: When in doubt, kill. Still, he found the young Marineâs actions unnecessaryâ¦and a little sloppy.

The architecture of the Covenant fighter bay was similar to the interior of the other Covenant ship the Chief had recently been inside, the *Truth and Reconciliation*. Low indirect lights illuminated the dark purple walls. The alien metal appeared to be stenciled with odd, faintly luminescent geometric patterns that overlapped each other. The ceiling was vaulted and unnecessarily high, maybe ten meters. In contrast to a human ship, it was a waste of space.

The Chief spotted a large door at the back of the bay.

The door was a distorted hexagonal shape and large enough that the entire team could enter at the same timeânot that heâd ever be foolish enough to take up such a formation in hostile territory. The door had four sections that, when keyed to open, would silently slide away from the center.

âThat will take us to the main corridor,â Cortana said. âAnd from there, to the bridge.â

The Chief waved Locklear to the right side of the door, Sergeant Johnson to the left.

âLieutenant Haverson,â he called out, âyouâre our rear guard. Polaski, hit the door controls. Hand signals from now on.â

Haverson tossed an ironic salute to the Chief but tightened his grip on his weapon and scanned the bay.

Polaski moved forward and crouched by the panel in the middle of the door. She turned her cap around and leaned closer, then looked back to the Chief and gave him a thumbs-up.

He raised his rifle and nodded, giving her the go-ahead to breach the door.

She reached for the controls. Before she touched them, though, the door slid apart.

Standing on the opposite side were five Elites: Two stood shielded by either edge of the door; a third stood centered in the corridor, plasma rifle leveled at the Chief; behind it, the fourth

Elite covered the rear of their formation; and one last Elite crouched in front of the door control panelânose to nose with Polaski.

The Chief fired two bursts directly over Polaskiâs head. His first shots struck the Elite in the middle of the corridor. His second burst hit the Elite standing rear guard. The alien warriors hadnât activated their shields, and 7.62mm rounds punctured their armor. The pair of Elites dropped to the deck.

Their comrades on either side of the door howled and attacked. The whine of plasma rifle fire echoed through the bay as blue-white energy bolts crashed into the Chiefâs own shields.

His shield dropped away, and the insistent drone of a warning indicator pulsed in his helmet. His vision clouded from the flare of energy weapon discharges, and he struggled to draw a bead on the Elite in front of Polaski. It was no goodâhe had no clear shot.

The Elite drew a plasma pistol. Polaski drew her own sidearm.

She was fasterâor luckier. Her pistol cleared its holster; she snapped it up and fired. The pistol boomed as a shot took the Elite right in the center of its elongated helmet.

The Eliteâs own shot went wide and seared into the deck behind Polaski.

Polaski emptied her clip into the alienâs face. A pair of rounds rocked the alien back. Its shields faded, and the remaining rounds tore through armor and bone.

It fell on its back, twitched twice, and died.

Johnson and Locklear unleashed a hellish crossfire into the corridor and made short work of the remaining Elites as Polaski hugged the deckplates.

âNow *thatâs* what Iâm talkinâ about,â Johnson crowed. âAn honest-to-God turkey shoot.â

Ten meters down the passage a dozen more Elites rounded a corner.

âUh-oh,â Locklear muttered.

âSergeant,â the Chief barked. âDoor control!â John moved to Polaskiâs position in two quick strides, grabbed her by her collar, and dragged her out of the line of fire. Plasma bolts singed the air where sheâd been.

He dropped her, primed a grenade, and tossed it toward the

rushing Elites.

The Sergeant fired his assault rife at the door controls; they exploded in a shower of sparks, and the doors slammed shut.

A dull *thump* echoed behind the thick metal, then an eerie silence descended on the bay. Polaski struggled to her feet and fed a fresh clip into her pistol. Her hands shook.

âCortana,â the Chief said. âWe need an alternate route to the bridge.â

A blue arrow flashed on his heads-up display. The Chief turned and spotted a hatch to his right. He pointed to the hatch and signaled his team to move, then ran to the hatch and touched the control panel.

The small door slid open to reveal a narrow corridor beyond, snaking into the darkness.

He didnât like it. The corridor was too dark and too narrowâa perfect place for an ambush. He briefly considered heading back to the primary bay door, but abandoned that idea. Smoke and sparks poured from the door seams as the Covenant forces on the other side tried to burn their way through.

The Chief clicked on his low-light vision filters, and the darkness washed away into a grainy flood of fluorescent green. No contacts.

He paused to let his shields recharge, then dropped into a low crouch. He brought his rifle to bear and crept into the corridor.

The interior of the passage narrowed, and its smooth purple surface darkened. The Chief had to turn sideways to pass through.

âThis looks like a service corridor for their Engineers,â Cortana said. âTheir Elite warriors will have a tough time following us.â

The Chief grunted an acknowledgment as he eased his way through. There was a scraping sound and a flash of sparks as his energy shield brushed the wall. It was too tight a fit. He powered down the shields, which left him just enough room to squeeze through.

Locklear followed behind him, then Polaski, the Sergeant, and finally Haverson.

The Chief pointed at Haverson, then at the door. The Lieutenant frowned, then nodded. Haverson closed the hatch and ripped out the circuitry for the control mechanism.

There had been dozens of Engineers in the launch bayâand there were enough on the ship to merit their own access tunnel. The Chief hadnât seen anything like this on the *Truth and Reconciliation*.

In fact, he hadnât seen a single Engineer on that ship. What made this ship different? It was armed like a ship of warâ¦yet had the support staff of a refit vessel.

âStop here,â Cortana said.

The Chief halted and killed his external speakers so he could speak freely. âProblem?â

âNo. A lucky break, maybe. Look to your left and down twenty centimeters.â

The Chief squinted and noticed that a portion of the wall extruded into a circular opening no larger than the tip of his thumb. âThatâs a data portâ¦or what passes for one with the Covenant Engineers. Iâm picking up handshake signals in short-wave and infrared from it. Remove me and slot me in.â

âAre you sure?â

âI canât do much good in there with you. Once Iâm directly in contact with the shipâs battlenet, however, I can infiltrate and take over their systems. Youâll still need to get to the bridge and manually give me access to their engineering systems. In the meantime, I may be able to control secondary systems and buy you some time.â

âIf youâre sure.â

âWhen have I not been sure?â she snapped.

The Chief could sense her impatience through the neural interface.

He removed Cortanaâs data chip from the socket in his helmet. The Chief felt her leave his mind, felt the heat rush back into his head, pulsing with the rhythm of his heartâ¦and once again, he was alone in the armor.

He slotted Cortanaâs chip into the Covenant data port.

Locklearâs face rippled with disgust, and he whispered, âYou couldnât pay me to stick any part of myself in that thing.â

The Chief made a slashing gesture across his throat, and the Marine fell silent.

âIâm in,â Cortana said.

âHow is it?â the Chief said.

There was a half-second pause. âItâsâ¦different,â Cortana

replied. âProceed thirty meters down this passage and turn left.â

The Chief motioned the team forward.

âItâs *very* different,â Cortana murmured.

Â

Cortana was built for software intrusion. She had been programmed with every dirty trick and code-breaking algorithm the Office of Naval Intelligence, Section Three had ever created, and a few more tricks sheâd developed on her own. She was the ultimate thief and electronic spy. She slipped into the Covenant system.

It was easy the first time she had entered their network as the Longsword had approached the flagship. She had set their weapons systems into a diagnostic mode. The Covenant had determined the problem and quickly reset the system, but it had given Polaski the precious seconds her sluggish human reflexes had needed to get inside the launch bay.

âHow is it?â the Chief asked.

Now the element of surprise was gone, and the systemâs counterintrusion systems were running on high alert. Something else prowled the systems now. Delicate pings bounced off the edges of Cortanaâs presence; they probed, and withdrew.

It felt as if there were someone else running through their system. A Covenant AI? The possibility of one nearby intrigued her.

âItâsâ¦different,â she finally answered.

She scanned the shipâs schematics, deck by deck, then flashed through the vesselâs three thousand surveillance systems. She picked out the quickest route to the bridge from their current position and stored it in a stolen tertiary system buffer. She multitasked a portion of herself and continued to analyze the shipâs structure and subsystems.

âProceed thirty meters down this passage and turn left.â

Cortana hijacked the external ship cameras and detected the six Covenant cruisers. They had stalled their pursuit of the Longsword and now hovered a hundred kilometers off the flagshipâs starboard side. The strange U-shaped Covenant dropships launched from the cruisers and swarmed toward the flagship. That was trouble.

Within the flagship she spotted a dozen Elite hunter-killer

teams sweeping the corridors. She scrambled the shipâs tracking systems, generated electronic ghosts of the Chief and his team along a path directed toward the nose of the ship, where UNSC command-and-control centers were typically located. Maybe she could fool the Elites into a wild goose chase.

She uploaded the coordinates of those enemies into the Chiefâs HUD.

A tickle of feedback teased through the data stream.

Cortana locked onto the source of that feedback, listened, discerned a nonrandom pattern to the signal, then cut off contact. She had no time to play hide-and-seek with whatever else was in this system.

Cortana had to finally admit to herself that she didnât have the power to contend with a possible enemy artificial construct. She had absorbed a tremendous volume of data from Haloâs systems: eonsâ worth of records on Haloâs engineering and maintenance, the xenobiology of the Flood, and every scrap of information on the mysterious âForerunnersâ the Covenant revered so much. The information would take her a week of nonstop processing to examine, collate, codifyâ¦let alone understand.

Even compressed, all the data filled her and cut into optical subsystems that she usually reserved for her processing. She had a nagging suspicion that the file compression had been too hastyâand that the Halo data might be corrupted.

In effect, the vast amount of information she had copied bloated her, made her slower and less effective.

She hadnât mentioned this to the Chief. She could barely admit it to herself. Cortana was extremely proud of her intellect. But to operate as if nothing were different would be even more foolish.

She sent a blocking countersignal along the connection where this âotherâ was trying to contact her.

The portion of her consciousness examining the shipâs structure discovered that the bridge had another access point. Stupid. She should have seen it immediately, but this other entrance had been filed under the schematics as an emergency system. It was a tiny corridor that connected to a set of escape pods. That route shared a vent with an engineering passage.

âChief, thereâs another way to the bridge.â

âAffirmative. Wait one.â There was a burst of gunfire on the COM, then silence. *âGo ahead, Cortana.â*

âUploading the route now,â she said. âI do not believe you can fit through this new passage in your armor. I suggest you split your team and proceed along both routes to maximize your chances of egress onto the bridge.â

âUnderstood,â the Chief said. *âPolaski and Haverson with me. Johnson and Locklear, you take the escape pod route.â*

She continued to track both teams and the relative positions of the Covenant parties. She replicated additional ghost signals to confuse the enemy.

Cortana picked up increasing communications bandwidth between the flagship and the cruisers. Reports of the invadersâa call for helpâa warning to be relayed to the home world. There were references to the âholy one,â and those messages had what she considered amusing attempts at encryption to keep them secret. Curious, she had to investigate what the Covenant thought important enough to hide.

As she decrypted those messages and others cross-referenced and filed in their COM archives, she detected an energy spike on the flagshipâs lateral sensors. One cruiser off to starboard moved farther away; it turned, its engines glowed, the black around it rippled electric blue. The Covenant ship sped forward, tore the night, and vanished into Slipspace.

Cortana noted their departure vector for future referenceâ¦a possible clue at the location of their home world.

It was puzzling that the Covenant would call for help. Their warriors were intensely proud; they almost never ran from a fight. They didnât ask for helpâ¦not for themselves. Then again, this ship, although armed for war, didnât appear to be staffed for combat. It carried only a few hundred Elites and an army of Engineers.

As Cortana pondered this, she continued to generate a countersignal to match to the probe sent by the other presence in the system. She hoped to cloak her activity as long as possible. The otherâs signal morphed into a series of Bessel functions, and she compensated to match.

She automated this process, commandeering a portion of the Covenantâs own NAV computer to do so, and then she herded the electronic ghosts of the Chief and the others to confuse the

pursuing Elite forces.

At the same time, she continued her study of the Covenant ship and its systemsâit was a unique opportunity. The information on their advanced Slipspace drive, their weaponsâit could leapfrog human technology decades forward.

âCortana?â The Chiefâs voice broke her concentration. There were sounds of plasma bolts and automatic weapons fire. *âWeâve got Elites in active camouflage in the passage. We need a way around this intersection.â*

She had not considered the Elitesâ light-bending technology. She was doing too much, spreading herself too thin. She halted her ongoing study of the Covenant technology and found the Chief a way around the intersection.

She rebooted her human communications and protocol routines and said, âAccess panel to your right, Chief. Down three meters, straight ahead five meters, turn to your left and then up again.â

She heard an explosion. *âGot it,â* the Chief said.

Cortana had to focus on protecting the Chief. She halted her other searches and scrutinized the shipâs schematics. There had to be something she could use. A weapon. A way to stop their enemiesâthere: the backup terminus for their atmospheric preprocessors. Unlike the other systems, this one was classified as low priority and had minimal security layers.

She generated several hundred thousand Covenant codes in a microsecond and cracked the system. She diverted the air vents along the corridors the Chief and his team occupied to the primary air systems. She then tasked the processor pumps to service the rest of the ship and activated themâin reverse.

Warnings flashed throughout the Covenant system as the pressure suddenly dropped in 87 percent of the shipâs passages. She squelched them.

The other presence in the system tried to shut the pumps off. She blocked that signal and assigned a new code to the security systems: âWE REGRET TO INFORM YOU.â

She heard the other AI scream, an echo of an echo that reverberated through her processors. She knew the soundâfamiliar like a human voice, but terribly distorted.

She scanned through the shipâs cameras and saw Grunts squeal and fall over, methane leaking from their breathers as the

pressure dropped. Engineers turned blue, slowed, and died, floating in place with tentacles twitching, still searching for something to fix. The Elite hunt-and-destroy parties halted in the corridors and clutched their throats, mandibles snapping at air that was no longer there; they toppled and suffocated.

An impulse flickered through her ethics subroutine and generated an interrupt command, designed to make her stop and rethink her decisions. But Cortana knew it was either kill or be killed. She rerouted all signals from her ethics routine and shut it down. She couldnât afford to be slowed down by such secondary considerations.

âChief,â she whispered over the COM. âBe advised that the passages Iâm uploading into your NAV system no longer contain atmosphere. Proceeding into those regions will be lethal to the rest of your team.â

There was a three-second pause, and then the Chief replied, *âUnderstood.â*

Cortanaâs decryption of the Covenant communiquÃ©s referencing the âholy oneâ finally cycled to a halt. The language in them was unusually ornateâeven more so than the florid prose of the higher-ranking Elites. It was impossible to develop a literal translation, but she gleaned that some dignitary was due at the Halo construct. Soon.

This visitor was so important that these warships were only the advance scouting party. More ships were on their way. Hundreds of them.

âChief,â Cortana said. âWe may have a probââ

âHold transmission, Cortana,â the Chief interrupted. *âWeâre outside the command center. Can you tell how many are inside?â*

âNegative. They have disabled the bridge sensors,â she replied.

âYou heard Cortana,â the Chief said, addressing his companions. *âExpect anything. Sergeant, you and Locklear: Get in position.â*

âRoger that,â Sergeant Johnson whispered. *âIn position and ready to kick Covenant ass.â*

âWeâre about to blow the door on this end, Cortana. Stand by.â

Cortana picked up energy surges on the flagshipâs lateral sensors. The Covenant cruisers turned; their plasma weapons warmed and readied to fire.

âChief,â Cortana said. âHurry!â

âPlasma grenades on my mark,â the Chief said on the COM. *âMark! Toss them and take cover.â*

Â

The Chief tossed two plasma grenades. They burned magnesium-brilliant and adhered to the heavy alloy of the bulkhead doors that encased the bridgeâone of the alien weaponâs more useful properties. He moved around the corner of the passage and shielded Haverson and Polaski.

Five seconds elapsed, and a flash filled the hallway. The Chief moved back to the doors. They shone mirror-bright where the grenade had detonated but were otherwise unharmed.

A hundred grenades wouldnât have blasted through these doorsâbut when Covenant plasma grenades detonated, they disrupted electronics and shielding. The Chief dug his gauntleted fingers into the door crackâhoping that the disruption had knocked out the motors and shielding keeping these doors closed.

He braced himself and tried to pull the doors apart at the seams. They slid a few centimeters, then ground to a halt. The Chief adjusted his footing and strained at them again, but the doors remained frozen in place.

The Chiefâs motion sensors pulsed a warningâthere was movement directly on the other side of the door.

He shoved the muzzle of his assault rifle into the narrow opening and squeezed the trigger. Spent shell casings clattered to the floor.

A howl echoed from the other side, and a curl of gray smoke drifted through the crack.

The Chief slung his rifle, grabbed the doors, flexed, pulledâand this time the heavy metal moved.

A flash of plasma fire washed over his shields, blinding him. He ignored it, closed his eyes, and continued to force his way through the door. Another plasma shot struck him in the chest.

The doors were half a meter apartâgood enough.

He rolled to the side and gave his shields a moment to regenerate.

Nothing. The suitâs alarms pulsed insistently. He squinted through the glowing spots that swam in his vision and scanned

the damage reportâthe MJOLNIRâs internal temperature was over sixty degrees Celsius, and the Chief heard the whine of microcompressors in his armor, trying to compensate.

âMarines!â he yelled. âSuppressing fire!â

âHell yes, Master Chief,â Locklear replied. Locklear dropped to one knee and fired through the opening; Johnson stood and fired over the younger Marineâs head.

The Chief rebooted his shielding control software.

Nothing. His shield system was dead.

The shooting stopped. âIâm out,â Locklear said.

âAnd Iâm in,â the Chief said.

He rushed into the room and stepped over the dead Elite on the floor before him. Its torso had been ripped openâshot as it tried to hold the doors closed.

The Chief scanned the room. It was circular, twenty meters across, with a raised platform in the center that was ten meters across and ringed with holographic control surfaces. The central platform floated over a pit in the floor. Within the pit were exploded optical conduits and a trio of Covenant Engineers, cowering in fear.

âDonât shoot the Engineers,â Cortana warned. âWe need them.â

âUnderstood,â the Chief replied. âAcknowledge that order, Locklear.â

There was a pause over the COM and then Locklear said, *âRoger.â*

Along the circular walls, floor-to-ceiling displays showed the flagshipâs status as a variety of charts and graphs, peppered with the odd calligraphy of the Covenant. They also showed the space surrounding them, and the five remaining Covenant cruisers closing in.

The Chief caught a motion in his peripheral vision: An Elite in jet-black armor materialized from the wall display, its light-bending camouflage dissolving. It strode toward the Chief, roaring a challenge.

The Chiefâs rifle snapped up, and he squeezed the trigger. Three rounds spat from the muzzle, then the bolt locked open. The ammo counter read 00âempty.

The shots flared on the Eliteâs shielding; a lucky round penetrated and deformed its shoulder. Purple-black blood

spattered on the deck, but it shrugged off the wound and kept coming.

Haverson charged into the room and leveled his pistol. âHold it!â he yelled, and thumbed off the weaponâs safety.

The Elite drew a plasma pistol and fired at the Lieutenantâbut never took its eyes off the Chief.

Haverson cursed and scrambled out of the room as the plasma charge slashed at him.

The Chief altered his grip on the rifle and crouched in a low fighting stance. Even with the shield malfunction, he was confident he could take a single Elite.

The Elite removed its helmet and dropped it. The plasma pistol clattered to the deck a moment later. It leaned forward, and its mandibles parted in what the Chief guessed had to be a smile. It moved closer, and a blue-white blade of energy flashed to life in its hands.

The Elite raised the energy blade and charged.

Chapter Eight

**1802 Hours, September 22, 2552 (Military Calendar) \
Aboard Unidentified Covenant Flagship,
Soell System, Halo Debris Field.**

The Master Chief ducked as the hissing energy blade slashed at him. He dived toward the Elite and slammed the butt of his rifle into the alienâs midsection.

The Elite doubled over, and the Chief brought the rifle butt down to smash the alienâs skullâ

But the Elite rolled back. There was a blur of motion as the energy blade lashed out and neatly bisected the assault rifle. The two halves of the wrecked MA5B clattered to the deck.

The blade of crackling white-hot energy narrowly missed the Chief. The MJOLNIRâs internal temperature skyrocketed.

He couldnât risk dancing at this range, so the Master Chief did the last thing the creature expected: He stepped closer and grabbed its wrists.

The bands of muscle on the Eliteâs arms were iron hard, and it struggled to free itself from the Chiefâs grasp. The Chief wrenched the alienâs sword arm and forced the blade awayâbut this took most of his strength, and he had to weaken his grasp on the Eliteâs other hand.

The energy blade blurred perilously close to the Chiefâs head. It missed by a fraction of a centimeter and sent a wash of static across his heads-up display.

The blade was a flattened triangle of white-hot plasma, contained in an electromagnetic envelope that emanated from its hilt. The Chief had seen such weapons slice battle-armored ODSTs in half and gouge gaping wounds in Titanium-A armor plating.

Worse, this Elite was tough, cunning, well trainedâand it hadnât spent days fighting nonstop on Halo. The Chief felt every wound, pulled muscle, and strained tendon in his body.

Haverson and Polaski moved onto the bridge, their pistols drawn, but neither of them had a clear line of fire.

âMove, Chief!â Haverson shouted. âDamn it, weâve got no

shot!â

Easier said than done. If he let go, the Elite would cut him in two.

The Master Chief grunted, struggling to turn the Elite.

The alien fought back for a moment, thenâinstead of resistingâlurched back, right into the path of the Chiefâs advancing teammates.

The Elite flicked the angle of its blade flat so the arc of energy whipped toward Haverson and Polaski.

Haverson screamed and fell to the ground as the energy blade sliced through his pistol and across his chest. Polaski cursed and fired a single shot, but it glanced off the Eliteâs shield.

The alien glanced at the source of the fire and growled in its guttural, warbling tongue.

âGet the Lieutenant out of here,â the Master Chief barked. He raised his knee to his chest and lashed out with a straight kick. His boot connected with the Eliteâs breastplate. The alienâs energy shield flared, then faded, and its breastplate cracked like porcelain beneath the force of the blow.

The alien staggered back, dragging the Master Chief with it. It coughed up purple-black blood that smeared Johnâs visor, obscuring his vision. Its foot struck something on the groundâthe alienâs dropped helmetâand it lost its footing.

Together they crashed to the ground.

The Master Chief kept his grip on the Eliteâs sword arm. The alienâs other hand, however, wrenched free and grabbed the fallen plasma pistol. The weaponâs muzzle charged with sickly green energy.

The Chief rolled to his right as the pistol discharged. A globe of plasma arced across the compartment and splashed over the displays behind him.

The instruments flickered, then flashed and sparked as the energy bolt melted their systems. Before the displays went dark, however, the Master Chief saw one of the Covenant cruisers open fire. A lance of plasma rushed through space toward the flagship.

The Chief and the Elite struggled, rising to their feet. The Chief batted the plasma pistol aside, and it clattered across the control center.

The Eliteâs mouth opened, and it snapped at the Chief. It was angry or panicking nowâ¦and he felt it getting stronger.

His grasp on the alien loosened.

There was motion behind the Elite; Sergeant Johnson and Locklear still struggled to get their hatch open more than a crack.

âSergeantâprepare to fire.â

âReady, Master Chief!â the Sergeant cried from the other side of the hatch.

The Chief tightened his grip on the Eliteâs sword arm, shoved his forearm into the alienâs throat and drove it backward, across the bridge. He slammed the creature into the partially opened hatch.

The energy blade cut into the Master Chiefâs armor, boiling through the alloy that protected his upper arm.

âSergeant, now! *Fire!â*

Gunfire exploded from the hatch, oddly muffled because the rounds impacted directly into the Eliteâs back. The alien snarled and contorted, but it held on to the Master Chief. The alien warrior sawed the blade deeper, cutting through the tough crystalline layers of the MJOLNIR armor. Hydrostatic gel oozed from the woundâ¦mixed with the Chiefâs blood.

âKeep. Shooting.â

A bullet hole appeared through the Eliteâs broken chestplateâbits of shattered armor and torn flesh spattered over the Chief.

The Master Chief slammed the Elite into the bulkhead, and a control panel behind the alien sparked. The door to the escape corridor hissed open, and the creature reeled back.

The alien was off balance, and the Chief finally had leverage. He bulled the Elite backward and hammered its arm into the wall. The alien metal rang like a gong, and the Elite dropped its energy sword. The blade guttered and went dark as its fail-safes permanently disabled the weapon.

The Chief forced the alien back, step by step. The deck was slippery with blood. Finally he twisted the Elite to the right and launched a powerful open-handed strike into the alienâs wounded chest.

The Elite howled in pain and flew back, through the open hatch of an escape pod.

âGet off this ship,â the Chief said. He hit a control stud and the hatch slammed shut. There was a sharp, metallic *bang* as the

locking clamps released. The pod screamed away from the hull.

The Chief exhaled. Sweat dripped in his eyes, momentarily blurring his vision.

âGood work, Sergeant, Locklear,â he panted. His shoulder burned. He tried to move it, but it was stiff and wouldnât respond.

The ship lurched.

âPlasma impact on the starboard foredeck!â Cortana called out. âShields down to sixty-seven percent.â She paused and then added, âAmazing radiative properties. Chief, you need to disable the navigation override so I can maneuver.â

Haverson and Polaski strode toward the Chief. Haverson clutched his chest and grimaced in pain from the sword wound. Polaski set her hand on the Master Chiefâs shoulder. âThatâs bad,â she whispered. âLet me get a first-aid kit from the Longsword, andââ

The Chief shrugged off her touch. âLater.â He saw her concerned expression melt into one ofâ¦what? Fear? Confusion?

âCortana, show me what to do,â the Chief said and made his way to the raised platform in the center of the bridge. âPolaski, you and Haverson get that other hatch open.â

âAye aye,â Polaski muttered, her voice tight. She and Haverson went to the hatch and got to work.

The Master Chief glanced at the control surfaces. As his hand hovered over them, the flat controls rose and became a three-dimensional web of the distinctive Covenant calligraphy. âWhere?â he asked.

âMove your hand to the right half a meter,â Cortana said. âUp twenty centimeters. That control. No, to the left.â She sighed. â*That* one. Tap it three times.â

Faint lights traced the surface as the Chief touched it; they flared red and orange and finally cooled to brilliant blue.

âIt worked,â Cortana said. âNAV controls coming online. I can finally move this crate. Hang on.â

The ship spun to port. On the displays that still functioned, four more Covenant cruisers tracked themâand fired.

The flagship accelerated, but the plasma torpedoes arced and followed them. âNo good,â Cortana said. âI canât overcome our inertia in this tub. Theyâre going to hit usâ¦unless I can get us into Slipspace.â

A rhythmic warble pulsed from one of the displays. It flashed red.

âOh no,â Cortana said.

The leading plasma torpedo impacted. Dull red fire smeared across the viewscreens.

âOh no, what?â Haverson demanded.

âThis shipâs Slipspace generator is inert,â Cortana replied. âThe disabled NAV controls were a trick. It must have been the Covenant AI; it lured me here while the drive was physically decoupled from the reactor. I can maneuver all I want, give orders to the Slipspace generatorâbut without the system powered up weâre not going anywhere.â

âThereâs a *Covenant* AI?â Haverson muttered, and raised an eyebrow.

âUpload the coordinates to power coupling,â the Master Chief said. âIâll take care of it.â

Two more plasma torpedoes impacted and splashed across the shield. âEnergy shields collapsing,â Cortana said. âBrace!â

The last shot collided with the flagship. The hull heated, and plasma boiled layers of armor plating away. The ship rolled as plumes of superheated metal vapor outgassed.

âAnother hit like that will breach the hull,â Cortana said. âMoving this tub at flank speed.â

âThe power coupling coordinates, Cortana,â the Master Chief insisted.

A route appeared on his heads-up display. The engineering rooms were twenty decks below the bridge.

âThose wonât do you any good,â Cortana told him. âThere are bound to be Elite hunter-killer teams waiting for you. And even if you managed to remove them, there is no way to repair the power coupling in time. We donât have the tools or the expertise.â

The Master Chief looked around the bridge. There had to be a way. There was *always* a wayâ

He leaned over the edge of the central platform and grabbed one of the Covenant Engineers that cowered below. He dragged it up by its float-sack. The creature squirmed and squealed.

âMaybe we donât have the expertise,â he said and shook the Engineer. âBut this thing does. Can you communicate with it? Tell it what we need?â

There was a pause. Then Cortana replied, âThere is an extensive communications suite in the Covenant lexicââ

âJust tell it Iâm taking it to fix something.â

âAll right, Chief,â Cortana said.

A stream of high-pitched chirps emanated from the bridge speakers, and the Engineerâs six eyes dilated. It stopped squirming and grabbed hold of the Master Chief with its tentacles.

âIt says âgoodâ and âhurry,ââ Cortana told him.

âEveryone else stay here,â the Chief said.

âIf you insist,â Haverson muttered, his face pale. Blood trickled from the wound in his chest.

The Master Chief looked at Johnson and Locklear. âDonât let the Covenant retake the bridge.â

âNot a problem, Chief,â Sergeant Johnson said. He stopped to kick the dead Elite once in the teeth, then slapped a fresh clip into his MA5B. He yanked the weaponâs charge handle, fed a round into the chamber, and stood at arms. âThose Covenant sissies are going to have to tango with me before they set one foot in this room.â

On the display two of the Covenant cruisers fired again.

The Chief watched as the plasma raced toward them, fire that spread across the black of space. âCortana, buy me some time,â he said.

âIâll do what I can, Chief,â Cortana told him. âBut youâd better move fast. Iâm running out of options.â

Â

Cortana was annoyed. She had let the Covenant AIâfor thatâs what this other presence in the system undoubtedly had to beâtrick her. She had gone straight for the simple lockdown of the NAV systems. She never performed a thorough systems check of the ship, assuming that there had only been one point of sabotage. It was a mistake she would never have made if sheâd been operating at full capacity.

She checked every system of the flagship. She then locked them out with her own security measures.

Cortana turned off her feelings of anger and guilt and concentrated on keeping the ship in one piece, and the Master Chief alive. Noâ¦she reconsidered and kept her emotions active.

The âintuitionâ provided by this aspect of her intelligence template was too valuable to deactivate in a battle.

She maneuvered the flagship toward the gas giant, Threshold. The incoming plasma might be disrupted by the planetâs magnetic fieldâif she dared get close enough.

Cortana diverted power from the foreshield to the aft portions, distorting the protective bubble around the flagship. She turned all seven plasma turrets aft and fired a pair of plasma torpedoes at the incoming salvo.

The plasma turrets warmed and belched superheated flameâbut it dispersed into a dull red cloud only a few meters from the point of fire, thinned, and then dissolved.

She saw a subsystem linked to the weapons control: an accompanying magnetic field multiplier. *That* was how the Covenant shaped and guided their charges of plasma. It acted as a sophisticated focusing lens. Something wasnât right, howeverâsomething had already been in this directory and had erased the software.

Cortana swore that when she caught this guerrilla Covenant AI, sheâd erase it line by line.

Without understanding how the guiding magnetic fields worked, the plasma turrets were no more useful than a fireworks display.

The enemy Covenant plasma charges, however, were tight and burned like miniature suns; they overtook the flagship and splashed over its reinforced aft shields. They boiled against the silver energy until the shields dulled and winked out.

The plasma etched a portion of the aft hull away like hot water dissolving salt. Cortana sensed the dull thumps of atmospheric decompressions.

She checked on the Chief. His signal was still on board, and his biomonitor indicated that he was still alive.

âChief, are you there yet? Iâm down to one last option.â

There was a static-filled pause over the COM, and then the Master Chief whispered, *âAlmost.â*

âBe careful. Your armor is breached. You can no longer function in a compromised atmosphere.â

His acknowledgment light winked on.

Cortana pushed the Covenant reactors to overload and plotted a course around Threshold. She had to slip into the outer reaches

of its atmosphere. The heat, ionization, and planetâs magnetic field might protect them from the plasma.

The flagship rolled and dived into the thin tendrils of clouds. Bands of white ammonia and amber ammonium hydrosulfide clouds snaked in sinuous ribbons. A red-purple spot of phosphorus compounds cycloned and lightning arced, illuminating an intervening layer of pale blue ice crystals.

But their ship no longer had shields. The friction heated the hull to three hundred degrees Celsius as she brushed against the upper reaches of Threshold.

On her aft cameras Cortana saw the trailing Covenant ships open fire. Their shots followed her like a pack of predator birds.

âCome and get me,â she muttered.

She adjusted the attack angle of the flagship so it nosed up, which produced a slight amount of lift. She concentrated the building heat toward the shipâs tail. A turbulent wake of superheated air corkscrewed behind them.

âCortana?â Polaski said. *âWeâre approaching the viable edge of an exit orbit. Youâre getting too close to the planet.â*

âI am aware of our trajectory, Warrant Officer,â she said and snapped off the COM. The last thing she needed was a flying lesson.

The leading edge of the plasma overtook them. It roiled in their wake, churned explosively with the atmosphere. The flagship pitched and dropped in the unstable air, but the plasma diffused and caused them no further damage. Behind the flagship was an unfurling trail hundreds of kilometers long, a wide flaming gash upon Threshold.

Cortana experienced a moment of triumphâthen squelched it. There was a new problem: The concussion from that blast had altered their flight path. The heat and overpressure wave had thinned the atmosphereâ¦just enough to cause the flagship to drop seven hundred meters. Wisps of ice crystals washed over the prow.

They were too deep now. They didnât have enough power to break orbit. They would spiral into the atmosphere, and would ultimately be crushed by the titanic gravitational forces of Threshold.

Â

The Chief spun in midair and planted his feet on the âground.â The gravity had been disabled in this elevator shaft. That had made traversing the many intervening decks easyâ¦as long as heâd been willing to jump and trust that the power in this part of the ship wouldnât be restored.

The Engineer clutching his shoulder tapped the tiny control panel on the wall. The doors at the bottom of the shaft sighed and slowly slid apart.

Funny how the creature didnât care what or who John was. Didnât it know their races were enemies? It was clearly intelligent and could communicate. Maybe it didnât care about enemies or allies. Maybe all it wanted to do was its job.

There was a corridor ahead, five meters wide, with a vaulted ceiling. Past a final arch, the passage opened up into the cavernous reactor room. The ambient lights in the hallway and room were off. Along the far wall of the room, however, the ten-meter-high reactor coils pulsed with blue-white lightning and threw hard shadows onto the walls.

The Master Chief adjusted his low-light filters to screen out the glow from the reactor. He made out the silhouettes of crates and other machinery. He also saw one of those shadows on the wall moveâ¦with the distinct slouching waddle of a Covenant Grunt. Then the motion was gone.

An ambush. Of course.

He paused, listened, and heard the panting of at least half a dozen Grunts, and then the high-pitched uneasy squeaks the creatures emitted when they were excited.

This came as a relief to the Master Chief. If there was an Elite here, it would have maintained better discipline and silenced the Grunts.

Still, the Master Chief hesitated. His shields were gone, his armor breached. He had been fighting almost nonstop for what felt like years. He was forced to admit that he was at the limits of his endurance.

A good soldier always assessed the tactical situationâand right now, his situation was serious. A single lucky plasma shot could inflict third-degree burns along his arm and shoulder and incapacitate him, which would give the Grunts an opportunity to finish him off.

The Chief flexed his wounded shoulder, and pain lanced

across his chest. He banished his discomfort and concentrated on how to win this fight.

It was ironic that after facing the best warriors in the Covenant, and after defeating the Flood, he could be killed by a handful of Grunts.

âChief,â Cortana said over the COM. âAre you there yet? Iâm down to one last option.â

The Master Chief replied in a whisper, âAlmost.â

âBe careful. Your armor is breached. You can no longer function in a compromised atmosphere.â

He flashed an acknowledgment to Cortana and concentrated on the problem at hand. Using grenades was not an option; a plasma grenade or a frag near those reactor coils could breach the containment vessel.

That left stealthâand outwitting the Grunts.

Maybe heâd use his grenades after all. The Master Chief set a plasma grenade in the center of the elevator shaft. He took his remaining two frag grenades and set them aside as well. He felt along the elevator shaft walls and found what he neededâa length of hair-fine optical cord. He pulled out a three-meter length.

The Engineer gave a huff of irritation at this destruction.

The Master Chief threaded the line though the rings of his frag grenades and tied each end at anchor points ten centimeters off the floor. He wedged the grenades into the slot of the open door.

The trap was set; all he needed now was bait.

He set a plasma grenade on the far wall of the shaft and triggered it.

He pushed into the corridor, fast. Four seconds to go. The gravity, still active in this portion of the ship, pulled him to the deck. He melted into the shadows and sprinted along the wall two meters farther in, and halted along the inside of the first support brace. Three seconds.

One Grunt emitted a startled cry and a plasma shot sizzled down the center of the hallway.

Two seconds.

The Master Chief pried the Engineer off his shoulder and pressed the creature firmly into the join where the brace met the wall.

One second.

The Engineer squirmed for a moment, then stilled, perhaps sensing what was about to happen.

The plasma grenade detonated. A flash of intense light flooded the hallway and the room beyond.

The rest of the Grunts cried out; plasma bolts and a hail of crystalline needles filled the passage, impacting inside the elevator shaft.

The Grunts ceased fire. A lone Grunt cautiously stepped out from behind a crate and crept forward. It gave a barking, nervous laugh and then, encountering no resistance, waddled down the passage toward the elevator.

Four more Grunts followed, and they passed the Master Chief, oblivious that he hid behind the wall brace less than a half-meter from them.

They approached the elevator, sniffed, and entered.

There was the gentle *ping* as the frag grenade rings pulled free of the trip wire.

The Master Chief covered the Engineer.

One of the Grunts squealed, high and panicky. They all turned and ran.

Twin blasts of thunder enveloped the elevator shaft. Bits of meat and metal spattered along the corridor.

A needler skidded to a halt a meter away. It was cracked, its energy coil dim. The Master Chief grabbed itâducked as another plasma bolt singed over his head. He withdrew to the cover of the bracing support. He tried to activate the weapon. No luck. It was dead.

The Engineer snaked a tentacle around the weapon and tugged it away from Johnâs grasp. It cracked the case and peeled the housing open. The tip of one of its tentacles split into a hundred needle-fine cilia and swept over the inner workings. A moment later it reassembled the weapon and handed it, grip first, to the Master Chief.

The needler hummed with energy, and the glassine quills the weapon fired glowed a cool purple.

âThanks,â he whispered.

The Engineer chirped.

The Master Chief edged around the brace. He waited, needler held tightly in his hand, and became completely still. He had all

the time in the world, he told himself. No need to rush. Let the enemy come to you. All the timeâ

A Grunt poked its nose over a crate, trying to spot its enemy; it took a blind shot down the corridor and missed.

The Master Chief remained where he was, raised the needler, and fired. A flurry of crystal shards propelled down the passage and impaled the Grunt. It toppled backward, and the shards detonated.

The Master Chief waited and listened. There was nothing except the gentle thrumming of the reactor.

He moved down the corridor, weapon held before him as he cleared the room. He was careful to watch for the faint rippling of air that would alert him to the presence of camouflaged Elites. Nothing.

The Engineer floated behind him, and then accelerated toward the disengaged power coupling. It hissed and chittered as it rapidly manipulated a small square block of optical crystal, unscrambling the internal circuit pathways.

âCortana,â he said. âIâve gotten to the coupling. The Engineer appears to know what itâs doing. You should have power for the Slipspace generator in a moment.â

âItâs too late,â Cortana told him.

Chapter Nine

**1827 Hours, September 22, 2552 (Military Calendar) \
Aboard Unidentified Covenant Flagship,
Soell System, Halo Debris Field.**

The flagship plunged through Thresholdâs churning atmosphere. Cortana could not hold the shipâs attitude. It wobbled and blasted a fiery scar through the clouds, slowly rolling to port on its central axis.

Without shields, the flagshipâs hull continued to heat to seventeen hundred degrees Celsius. The nose glowed a dark red, which spread into an amber smear along the midsection and became a white-hot plume at the shipâs tail. Conduits and feathery antenna arrays melted, separated, and left a trail of molten metal in an explosive wake. Shocks rippled along the frame as the overpressure shed off the bow in waves. The friction from the planetâs dense atmosphere would shred the ship in a matter of seconds.

âCortana,â the Master Chief said. *âIâve gotten to the coupling. The Engineer appears to know what itâs doing. You should have power for the Slipspace generator in a moment.â*

âItâs too late,â Cortana told him. âWe are now too low to escape Thresholdâs gravitational pull. Even at full power we canât break our degrading orbit. And we canât tunnel into Slipspace, either.â

The incoming Covenant fire had forced them deeper into the atmosphere. She had pushed their trajectory to the edge of what had been safeâit was that, or be engulfed in plasma. But she had saved them from one deathâ¦only to delay that fate by a scant minute.

She recomputed the numbers, thrust and velocity and gravitational attractions. Even if she overloaded the reactors to critical-meltdown levels, they were still stuck in an ever-descending spiral. The numbers didnât lie.

The Master Chiefâs Engineer must have repaired the power coupling, because the Slipspace generator was functional againâfor all the good it did them.

To enter Slipspace a ship had to be well away from strong gravitational fields. Gravity distorted the superfine pattern of quantum filaments through which Cortana had to compute a path. Covenant Slipspace technology was demonstrably superior, but she doubted that the enemy had ever attempted a Slipspace entry this close to the center of a gas giant.

Cortana toyed with the idea of trying anywayâpulse the Slipspace generators and maybe sheâd get a lucky quadrillion-to-one shot and locate the correct vector through the tangle of gravity-warped filaments. She rejected the possibility; at their current velocity, any attempt to maneuver the ship would send it into a chaotic tumble from which theyâd never recover.

âTry something,â the Chief said to her with amazing calm. *âTry anything.â*

Cortana sighed. âRoger, Chief.â

She booted the Covenant Slipspace generators; the software streamed through her consciousness.

The UNSC Shaw-Fujikawa Slipspace generators ripped a hole in normal space by brute force. But the Covenant technology used a different approach. Sensors came online, and Cortana could actually âseeâ the interlacing webs of quantum filaments surround the flagship.

âAmazing,â she whispered.

The Covenant could pick a path through the subatomic dimensions; a gentle push from their generators enlarged the fields just enough to allow their ships to pass seamlessly into the alternate space with minimal energy. Their resolution of the reality of space-time was infinitely more powerful than human technology. It was as if she had been blind before, had never seen the universe around her. It was beautiful.

This explained how the Covenant could make jumps with such accuracy. They could literally plot a course with an error no larger than an atomâs diameter.

âStatus, Cortana?â the Master Chief asked.

âStand by,â she said, annoyed at the distraction.

At this resolution Cortana could discern every ripple in space caused by Thresholdâs gravity, the other planets in this solar system, the sun, and even the warping of space caused by the mass of this ship. Could she compensate for those distortions?

Pressure sensors detected hull breaches on seventeen outer

decks. Cortana ignored them. She shut down all peripheral systems and concentrated on the task at hand. It was their only way out of this mess: Theyâd get *out* by going *through*.

She concentrated on interpolating the fluctuating space. She generated mathematical algorithms to anticipate and smooth the gravitational distortions.

Energy surged from the reactors into the Slipspace generator matrices. A path parted directly before themâa pinhole that became a gyrating wormhole, fluxing and spinning.

Thresholdâs atmosphere throbbed and jumped through the holeâsucked into the vacuum of the alternate dimension.

Cortana dedicated all her runtime to monitoring the space around the ship, and risked making microscopic course corrections to maneuver them into the fluctuating path. Sparks danced along the length of the hull as the nose of the flagship departed normal space.

She eased the rest of the ship through, surrounded by whirling storms and jagged spears of lightning.

She pinged her sensors: The hull temperature dropped rapidly and she registered a series of explosive decompressions on the breached decks.

Cortana emerged from her cocoon of concentration and immediately sensed the electronic presence of the other near her, monitoring her Slipspace calculations. It was practically on top of her.

âHeresy!â it hissed and then withdrewâ¦and vanished.

Cortana pulsed a systems check along every circuit in the ship, hoping to track the Covenant AI. No luck.

âSneaky little bastard,â she broadcast throughout the system. âCome back here.â

Had it seen what she had done? Had it understood what sheâd just accomplished? And if so, why declare it a âheresyâ?

True, manipulating eighty-eight stochastic variables in eleven-dimensional space-time was not childâs playâ¦but it was possible that the other AI would be able to follow her calculations.

Perhaps not. The Covenant were *imitative*, not innovative; at least, thatâs what all the ONI intelligence gathered on the collection of alien races had reported. She had thought this was exaggeration, propaganda to bolster human morale.

Now she wasnât so certain. Because if the Covenant had truly understood the extent of their own magnificent technology, they could have not only jumped into Slipspace *from* a planetâs atmosphereâbut jumped *into* a planetâs atmosphere, too.

They could have simply bypassed Reachâs orbital defenses.

The Covenant AI had called this heresy? Ludicrous.

Maybe the humans could eventually outthink the Covenant, given enough access to the enemyâs technologies. Cortana realized the humans actually had a chance to win this war. All they needed was time.

âCortana? Status please,â the Master Chief said.

âStand by,â Cortana reported.

stray plasma fire. It huffed, removed the cover, and delved into the tangle of optical cables.

The Chief left it alone. It wasnât a threat to him or his team. In fact, it and the others like it might be key to repairing this ship, and their continued survival.

He continued to the elevator shaft, stepping over the bodies of the Grunts in the hallway. He nudged them with his foot to make certain they were dead, and then retrieved two plasma pistols and one of the needle launchers.

He entered the elevator shaft, pushed off the deck, and floated upward in the null gravity. The Chief kept his eyes and ears sharp for any hint of a threat as he moved through the corridors to the bridge. Everything was quiet and still.

At the open bridge door, he paused and watched as Warrant Officer Polaski supervised a Covenant Engineer while it removed the blasted door control panels. The Engineer turned a melted piece of polarizing crystal before its six eyes, and then picked up an unblemished crystalline panel off the floor and inserted it into the wall.

Polaski wiped her hands on her greasy coveralls and waved him in.

Thin, blue smoke still filled the bridge, but the Chief noted that most of the display panels were once again active. Nearby, Sergeant Johnson tended Haversonâs wounds and Locklear stood guard. The young Marineâs eyes never left the Engineer, and his finger hovered close to, though not quite on, his MA5Bâs trigger.

The Engineer floated back, spun on its long axis, and looked first at Polaski, then the Chief.

A burst of static issued from the bridge speakers, and the Covenant Engineer looked to them and then to Polaski. It tapped the control, and the massive bridge doors slid shut.

The Engineer passed a tentacle over the controls. They flashed blue, then dimmed.

âIt locks now,â Polaski told them. âUgly here knows his stuff.â

Three ultrasonic whistles filled the air. The Covenant Engineer who had just repaired the bridge door snapped to attention, and its eyes peered intently forward. It chirped a response and then floated toward the Master Chief, trying to maneuver behind him.

âWhatâs it doing?â the Master Chief asked, turning to face the creature.

The Engineer huffed in annoyance and tried again to move around him.

The Master Chief didnât let it. While John had seen no hostility from the creatures, they were still part of the Covenant. Having one at his back grated against every instinct.

âIâve told it to repair your armorâs shields,â Cortana said. âLet it.â

The Master Chief allowed the small alien to pass. He felt the access panel removed from the shield generator housing on his back. Normally it took a team of three technicians to remove the safety catches and get to the radioactive power source. The Chief shifted uneasily. He didnât like this one bit, but Cortana had always known what she was doing.

Locklear watched this and ran a hand over his shaved head. He stood on the raised center platform and turned to the other Covenant Engineer as it repaired the burned-out displays on the port side of the room. He held his MA5B loosely, but it was still aimed in the alienâs general direction. âI donât care what Cortana says,â he told the Chief, âI donât trust them.â

The Engineer near Locklear floated to the bridgeâs holographic controls and passed a tentacle over a series of raised dots.

The screens snapped on and showed three Covenant cruisers closing fast.

Adrenaline spiked through the Master Chiefâs blood. âCortana, quickâtake evasive action.â

âRelax, Chief,â Locklear said. He waved his hand over a holographic control; the images on screen froze. âItâs just a replay.â He turned and examined the suspended plasma bolts just as they impacted on the flagshipâs shields. âMan,â he whispered. âI wish our boats had weapons like those.â

âWe might soon have exactly that, Marine,â Lieutenant Haverson said. He winced and stood, then moved to a screen that showed the storms in the upper atmosphere of Threshold. âPlay this one, Corporal.â

Locklear tapped one of the controls.

A line of sparkling blue lights appeared on screen, and the nose of the flagship edged into view. The blue line ripped a hole

in space, and the ship jumped forward. The clouds of Threshold vanished; there was only blackness on the screen.

Haverson slicked back the strands of his red hair that had fallen into his face. âCortana,â he asked, âhas anyone, human or Covenant, ever performed a Slipspace jump from within an atmosphere?â

âNo, Lieutenant. Normally such strong gravitational fields would distort and collapse the Shaw-Fujikawa event horizon. With the Covenantâs Slipspace matrices, however, I had greatly increased resolution. I was able to compensate.â

âAmazing,â he whispered.

âGoddamned lucky,â Polaski muttered. She tugged on the rim of her cap.

âIt worked,â the Master Chief told them. âFor now, thatâs all that matters.â He faced his team, trying to ignore the motions of the Covenant Engineer attached to his back. âWe have to plan our next move.â

âIâm sorry to disagree, Chief,â Lieutenant Haverson said. âThe mere fact that Cortanaâs maneuver worked is the *only* thing that matters now.â

The Chief squared himself to the Lieutenant and said nothing.

Haverson held up his hands. âI acknowledge that you have tactical command, Chief. I know your authority has the backing of the brass and ONI Section Three. Youâll get no argument from me on that point, but I put it to you that your original mission has just been superseded by the discovery of the technology on this ship. We should scrub your mission and head straight back to Earth.â

âWhatâs this other mission?â Locklear asked, his voice suspicious.

Haverson shrugged. âI see no reason to keep this information classified at this point. Tell him, Chief.â

The Master Chief didnât like how Haverson âaccededâ to his tactical command yet readily ordered him to reveal highly classified material.

âCortana,â the Chief said. âIs the bridge secure from eavesdroppers?â

âA moment,â Cortana said. Red lights pulsed around the roomâs perimeter. âIt is now. Go ahead, Chief.â

âMy team and Iââ the Master Chief started.

He hesitatedâthe thought of his fellow Spartans stopped him cold. For all he knew they were all dead. He pushed that to the back of his mind, however, and continued.

âOur mission was to capture a Covenant ship, infiltrate Covenant-controlled space, and capture one of their leaders. Command hoped they could use this to force the Covenant into a cease-fire and negotiations.â

No one said a word.

Finally, Locklear snorted and rolled his eyes. âTypical Navy suicide mission.â

âNo,â the Master Chief replied. âIt was a long shot, but we had a chance. We have a better chance now that we have this ship.â

âExcuse me, Master Chief,â Polaski said. She removed her cap and wrung it in her hands. âYouâre not suggesting that youâre going to continue that half-assed op, are you? We barely survived four days of *hell*. It was a miracle we got away from Reach, survived the Covenant on Haloâ¦not to mention the Flood.â

âI have a duty to complete my mission,â the Master Chief told her. âIâll do it with or without your help. Thereâs more at stake than our individual discomfortâeven our lives.â

âWeâre not Spartans,â Haverson said. âWeâre not trained for your kind of mission.â

That was certainly true. They werenât Spartans. Johnâs team would never give up. But as he scanned their weary faces, he had to acknowledge that they werenât ready for this mission.

The Sergeant stepped forward and said, âYou still want to go, I got your back, Chief.â

John nodded, but he saw the exhaustion even in the Sergeantâs dark eyes. There were limits to what any soldier, even a hardcore Marine like Johnson, could endure. And as much as he didnât want to admit it, his original orders, given only weeks ago, felt as if theyâd been issued a lifetime in the past. Even John felt the temptation to stop and regroup before continuing.

âWhatâs on this ship,â Haverson said, âcan save the human race. And wasnât that the goal of your mission? Letâs return to Earth and let the Admiralty decide. No one would question your decision to clarify your orders given the circumstancesââhe paused, then addedâââand the loss of your entire team.â

Haversonâs expression was carefully neutral, but the Chief still bristled at the further mention of his teamâand at the attempt to manipulate him. He remembered his order sending Fred, Kelly, and the others to the surface of Reach, thinking that he, Linda, and James were going on the âhardâ mission.

âListen to the El-Tee,â Locklear said. âWe deliver a little something for the R-and-D eggheads and maybe buy some shore leave. I vote for that plan.â He saluted Haverson. âHell yeah!â

âThis isnât a democracy,â the Master Chief said, his voice both calm and dangerous.

Locklear twitched but didnât back down. âYeah, maybe it isnât,â he said, âbut last time I checked, I take my orders from the Corpsânot from some swabbie. *Sir*.â

The Sergeant scowled at the ODST and moved to his side. âYou better get it together, Marine,â he barked, âor the Chiefâll reach down and pull you inside out by your cornhole. And thatâll be a sweet, sweet mercyâ¦compared to what *Iâm* gonna do to you.â

Locklear contemplated the Sergeantâs words and the Master Chiefâs silence. He looked to Polaski and then to Haverson.

Polaski stared at the Marine with wide eyes, then turned away. Haverson gave him a slight shake of his head.

Locklear sighed, eased his stance, and dropped his gaze. âMan, I really, really hate this shit.â

âI hate to interrupt,â Cortana said, âbut I find myself agreeing with the Lieutenant.â

The Chief clicked on a private COM channel. âExplain, Cortana. I thought our mission was what you were built for. Why are you backing out now?â

âIâm not âbacking out,ââ she shot back. âOur orders were given when the UNSC had a fleet, and when Reach was still an intact military presence. All that has changed.â

The Master Chief couldnât disagree with what she was sayingâ¦but there was something else in her voice. And for the first time, John thought that Cortana might be hiding something from him.

âWe have intact ship-scale plasma weapons and new reactor technologies,â Cortana continued. âImagine if every ship could maneuver with pinpoint precision in Slipspace.â She paused. âThe UNSC could be just as effective in space as you are in

ground engagements. We could actually *win* this war.â

The Master Chief frowned. He didnât like the Lieutenantâs or Cortanaâs argumentsâbecause they made sense. Aborting his mission was unthinkable. He had always finished what he started, and heâd always won.

As a professional soldier, John was ready to give up anything for victoryâhis personal comfort, his friends, his own life if thatâs what it tookâbut heâd never considered that heâd have to sacrifice his dignity and pride as well for the greater good.

He sighed and nodded. âVery well, Lieutenant Haverson. Weâll do it your way. I hereby relinquish my tactical command.â

âGood,â Haverson said. âThank you.â He faced the others and continued, âSergeant? You, Polaski, and Locklear get back down to the Longsword and grab whatever gear wasnât smashed to bits. Look for a field medkit, too, and then get back up here, double time.â

âYes, sir,â Sergeant Johnson said. âWeâre on it.â He and Polaski headed for the door, tapped the control, and let the panels slide apart.

Polaski shot a stare at the Master Chief over her shoulder; then, shaking her head, she followed the Sergeant.

âShit,â Locklear said, checking his rifle as he loped after them. âWait up! Man, Iâm never going to get another hourâs sleep.â

âSleep when youâre dead, Marine,â the Sergeant said.

The bridge doors sealed.

Haverson said, âPlot a course back to Earth, Cortana, and thenââ

âIâm sorry, Lieutenant Haverson,â Cortana said. âI canât do that. A direct course to Earth would be in violation of the Cole Protocol. Furthermore, we are not allowed an indirect route, either. Subsection Seven of the Cole Protocol states that no Covenant craft may be taken to human-controlled space without an exhaustive search for tracking systems that could lead the enemy to our bases.â

âSubsection Seven?â Haverson said. âI havenât heard of it.â

âVery few have, sir,â Cortana answered. âIt was little more than a technicality. Before this, no one had actually ever captured a Covenant vessel.â

âAn exhaustive search of this vessel would be difficult under

the circumstances,â Haverson said and cupped his hand over his chin, thinking. âIt must be more than three kilometers long.â

âI have a suggestion, sir,â the Chief said. âAn intermediate destination: Reach.â

âReach?â Haverson quickly hid the shock on his face with a smile. âChief, thereâs nothing in that system except a Covenant armada.â

âNo, sir,â the Master Chief replied. âThere areâ¦other possibilities.â

Haverson raised an eyebrow. âGo ahead, Chief. Iâm intrigued.â

âThe first possibility,â John said, âis that the Covenant have glassed the planet and moved on. In which case there might be a derelict, but serviceable, UNSC craft that we could repair and take to Earth. Weâd leave the Covenant flagship in low orbit and return with the proper scientific staff and equipment to effect a salvage operation.â

Haverson nodded. âA long shot. Although the *Euphrates* did have a Prowler attached to her. They were supposed to launch a reconnaissance mission, before they got the signal to drop everything and help defend Reach. So maybe itâs not such a long shot, after all. And the other possibility?â

âThe Covenant are still there,â the Master Chief said. âThe likelihood that they would attack one of their own capital ships is low. In either event, there is no violation of the Cole Protocol because the Covenant already know the location of Reach.â

âTrue,â Haverson said. He paced to the center of the bridge. âVery well, Chief. Cortana, set course for Reach. Weâll enter at the edge of the system and assess the situation. If itâs too hot, we jump and find another route home.â

âAcknowledged, Lieutenant,â Cortana replied. âBe advised that this ship traverses Slipspace much faster than our UNSC counterparts. ETA to Reach in thirteen hours.â

The Master Chief sighed and relaxed a little. There was another reason for choosing Reach, one he didnât reveal to the Lieutenant. He knew the odds of anyone surviving on the surface were remote. Astronomical, in factâ¦because once the Covenant decided to glass a planet, they did so with amazing thoroughness. But he had to see it. It was the only way he could accept that his teammates were dead.

A wash of static covered the Chief, first along his spine and then wrapping about his torso. There was an audible *pop*, and sparks crackled along the length of his MJOLNIR armor.

The Engineer released its grasp on him and chittered with excitement.

Diagnostic routines scrolled upon the Chiefâs heads-up display. In the upper right corner the shield recharge bar flickered red and slowly filled.

âThey work,â the Master Chief said. John was relieved to have his shields back. He wouldnât forget what it was like to fight without them, though. It had been a wake-up call: not to become dependent upon technology. It was also a reminder that most battles were won or lost in his head, before he engaged any enemy.

âImpressive little creatures,â Haverson remarked. He scrutinized the Covenant Engineer as it floated toward the wall of displays and began tinkering with one. âI wonder how the Covenant caste systemââ

âSir!â Sergeant Johnsonâs voice blasted over the COM, breaking with static. *âYouâve got to get down to the Longsword ASAP. You and the Chief.â*

âAre you under fire?â the Chief asked.

âNegative,â he replied. *âItâs one of the cryotubes you recovered.â*

âWhat about it, Sergeant?â Haverson snapped.

âChief, thereâs a Spartan in it.â

Chapter Ten

**1852 Hours, September 22, 2552 (Military Calendar) \
Captured Covenant Flagship, In Slipspace,
Location Unknown.**

After the Chief had left to investigate the cryopod, Haverson made certain that the bridge doors locked. He turned and walked over to the Covenant Engineer whoâd repaired the Master Chiefâs armor.

âFascinating creatures,â he murmured. He drew his sidearm and pointed it at the back of its head.

Two of the Engineerâs six eyes locked onto the muzzle of the weapon. A tentacle reached for it, split into fine probing threads, and touched the blue-gray metal.

Cortana asked, âWhat are youââ

Haverson shot the Engineer. The round tore through its head and spattered gore across the display the alien had been repairing.

âHaverson!â Cortana cried.

The other Engineer turned and squealedâthen a blinking light on the broken display captured its attention and it returned to its work, oblivious.

Haverson knelt by the dead Engineer and holstered his gun. âI had no other choice,â he whispered. He touched the creatureâs odd, slick skin. Its color faded from a faint pink to a cold gray.

He dragged it to the escape hatch, opened it, and placed the body in the corridor. He paused, and went back to fold its tentacles over its body. âIâm sorry. You didnât deserve it.â

âWhy was that necessary?â Cortana demanded.

Haverson stood, wiped his hands on his slacks, and sealed the escape hatch access. âIâm surprised you even have to ask, Cortana.â He heard the anger in his voice. He checked his rising ire. He wasnât mad at Cortana; he was mad at himselfâfurious because of the ugly necessity of his act.

âThe Covenant are imitativeânot innovative,â he said. âThe Engineer you ordered to repair the Chiefâs armor just got a first-

hand look at our shield technology, a technology we stole from the Covenant and improved upon. If it somehow managed to rejoin the Covenant, that improved technology would be theirs. How would you like to see that technology manifest as better personal shields for their Elite warriors? Or on their warships?â

Cortana was silent.

âCorporal Locklear was right,â Haverson muttered. âI really hate this shit, too.â

âI understand,â Cortana finally replied, but her voice was so cold it could have frozen helium.

Haverson sighed and looked at his hands. The Engineerâs blood tattooed his skin with tiny pinpoints of blue-black. âDo you think that the Master Chief will find what heâs really looking for on Reach?â

âWhat do you mean âreally looking forâ?â Cortana said. Her voice was still frosty, but curiosity thawed her tone.

âI mean the other Spartans.â Haverson gave a short laugh. âTrue, his argument to go to Reach was validâwe wouldnât be going otherwise. But thatâs not what heâs after. He sent his team down to the surface of Reachâ¦sent them to their deaths. What commander wouldnât go back? And what commander wouldnât hope that they were alive? No matter what the odds?â

Chapter Eleven

**0930 Hours, September 4, 2552 (Military Calendar) \
UNSC High Command (Highcom) Facility
Bravo-6, Sydney, Australia, Earth.
Two and A Half Weeks Ago.**

Lieutenant Wagner walked through metal- and explosive-detector gates and into the atrium entrance of the large, vaguely conical structure. Officially designated UNSC HighCom Facility B-6, the sprawling edifice had been nicknamed âthe Hive.â

It was overcast in Sydney. Gray light filtered in through the crystal dome overhead.

He marched past officers and NCOs moving with purpose to whatever destinations occupied their time. He ignored the displays of acacia trees and exotic ferns meant for the press and civilian tours. Today there was no time for pleasantries.

In another hour the apparent calm and efficiency of High-Com would be shattered into a billion pieces. Only a few of the brass knew that the UNSCâs mightiest outpost, Reach, was now nothing more than a cinder.

Wagner approached the receptionistâs station under the watchful eyes of a trio of armored Marine MPs.

Keeping Reachâs fate quiet was not the UNSCâs biggest secret, not by a country mile. Virtually no one in the civilian population of the Inner Colonies knew how perilously close they were to losing this war. ONI Section Two had done a brilliant job of preserving the fiction that Earth forces held their own against the Covenant.

And what did the citizens of the Outer Colonies think? Those who hadnât fled to remote outposts and hidden privateer bases werenât in any position to make trouble. The Covenant didnât take prisoners.

âYouâre expected today, Lieutenant,â the receptionist said. She was a young Chief Petty Officer and looked like she didnât have a care, or a clue. But her eyes gave her away. She knew *something*. Maybe not what, but she had undoubtedly picked up on the increased security protocolsâ¦or the haunted looks in the

eyes of her commanding officers.

âPlease proceed to elevator eight,â she told him and returned her attention to the screen in front of her.

He made a mental note to find out who this perceptive person was and see if she could be recruited into Section Three. ONI had lost a lot of good people in the last few weeks.

Wagner moved to the solid steel wall, and a pair of doors parted for him. He entered the small room; the doors closed and locked with a whisper-quiet *snik*.

A fingerprint pad and retinal scanner extended from the wall. Wagner pressed his hand onto the scanner, and a needle stabbed his index finger. Theyâd check his DNA against the sample on file. He blinked once and then rested his chin on the retinal scanner.

âGood morning, Lieutenant,â a sweet female voice whispered in his ear.

âGood morning, Lysithea. How are you today?â

âVery well, now that I see that you have returned safely from your mission. I assume everything went as expected.â

âYou know thatâs classified,â he told the AI.

âCertainly,â she replied, her tone playful. âBut Iâll find out anyway, you know. Why not save me the time and just tell me?â

Although he generally enjoyed this tÃªte-Ã -tÃªte with Lysithea, he knew it was part of the biometric scan, too. She scanned his brainwaves and voice patterns in response to her queries and matched them to older responses in her memory. She probably tested his loyalty in security measures as wellâhe didnât put anything past Section Three; they grew more paranoid every day.

âOf course youâll find out,â Wagner replied. âBut I still canât tell you. That would be a breach of security, punishable under Article 428-A. In fact,â he said in a more serious tone, âIâll have to report this violation to my controller.â

She laughed, and it sounded like fine bone china clinking together. âYou may proceed, Lieutenant,â she told him.

The doors parted and revealed a corridor lined with walnut panels and paintings of *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, *Admiral Coleâs Last Stand*, various alien landscapes, and space battles.

Although he had barely felt the descent, Wagner knew he had dropped three kilometers into the planet, through solid layers of

granite, reinforced concrete, plates of Titanium-A, and EMP-hardened metal. None of this made him feel any safer, though; ONIâs research facility on Reach had the same setup, and it hadnât done those poor bastards any good.

He stepped off the elevator. Lysithea whispered at his back: âWatch out in there. Theyâre looking to put someoneâs head on a pike.â

Wagner swallowed and straightened the microscopic wrinkles in his uniform. He searched for a reason to delayâanything that would keep him out of the room at the end of this corridor. He sighed and overcame his inertia. No one kept the Security Committee for the UNSC waiting.

A pair of MPs snapped to as he approached the set of double doors. They didnât salute, and their hands rested on their holstered sidearms. They stared straight ahead, but Wagner knew that if he twitched the wrong way heâd be shot first and questioned later.

The doors silently swung inward.

He entered, and the doors closed behind him and locked. Wagner recognized most of the brass seated at the crescent-shaped table: Major General Nicolas Strauss, Fleet Admiral Sir Terrence Hood, and Colonel James Ackerson. Vice Admiral Whitcombâs chair was empty.

Another half-dozen officers were also present, and all were of command rank, which made Wagner nervous. Each had display tablets set before them, and even upside down, Wagner recognized his preliminary report and video records.

Wagner saluted.

General Strauss leaned forward and snapped off his display. âChrist! Did we know they had so many damn ships?â He banged a fist onto the table. âWhy the hell didnât we know about this? Who in ONI let this one slip by?â

Ackerson leaned back. âNo one is to blame, Generalâexcept the Covenant, obviously. Iâm more concerned with our response to this incursion. Our fleet was decimated.â

Ackersonâs reputation preceded him. Wagner had heard about the lengths to which heâd gone in the past to make sure his own operations got priority over Section Threeâs. His rivalry with the SPARTAN-II program leader, Dr. Catherine Halsey, was the stuff of legend. Wagner thought Ackerson had been

reassigned to a frontline post. Apparently heâd squirmed out of it. That was trouble.

Admiral Hood straightened and pushed his display away and finally acknowledged Wagner. He returned the salute. The Admiral was impeccably groomed, and yet there were dark circles under his eyes. âAt ease, Lieutenant.â

Wagner tucked his hands behind the small of his back and moved his feet slightly apart, but otherwise didnât relax a millimeter. One was never at ease when in the presence of lions, sharks, and scorpions.

Hood turned to Ackerson. â*Decimate* is the wrong word, Colonel. We would have been *decimated* if we lost one ship out of every ten.â He voice rose slightly. âInstead, we lost ten of our ships for every one that managed to limp away. It was a total disaster!â

âOf course, Admiral.â Ackerson nodded, pretending to listen, and his eyes flickered over the report again. His eyebrows raised as he noticed the time and date stamp. âThereâs one thing, however, Iâd like answered first.â His glassy glare locked onto Wagner. âThe time difference between the events in this report and nowâ¦â He trailed off, lost in thought. âCongratulations, Lieutenant. This is a new speed record from Reach to Earth. Especially when I know you took the time to perform the legally required random jumps before returning to Earth.â

âSir,â Wagner replied. âI followed the Cole Protocol to the letter.â

That was a lie and everyone in this room knew it. ONI was always bending the Cole Protocol. In this case, it was probably justified because of the value of the intel. Still, if they wanted to crucify him, all they had to do was check the time logged on his Prowlerâs engines and do the math.

Hood waved his hand. âThatâs hardly the issue.â

âI think it is,â Ackerson snapped. âReach is gone. Thereâs nothing between Earth and the Covenant now except a lot of vacuumâthat and whatever secrecy we can preserve.â

âWeâll review Section Threeâs practices later, Colonel.â Admiral Hood turned to Wagner. âIâve read your report, Lieutenant. It is extremely detailed, but I want to hear it from you. What did you see? Are there any details you thought too sensitive to include in your report? Tell me everything.â

Wagner took in a deep breath. He had prepared for this and he related, as best he could, how the Covenant ships appeared in the system, the valiant efforts of the UNSC fleet defending Reach, how they failed and were systematically destroyed.

âWhen the Covenant slipped onto the surface of Reach with their tactical forces and took out the orbital-gun generatorsâthat was the end. Well, I saw only the start of the end. They glassed the planet, starting with the poles.â

Wagner, whoâd two years ago had a third of his body burned by Covenant plasma and not once screamed or shed a tear, paused and blinked away the moisture blurring his vision. âI trained at the Naval Academy on Reach, sir. It was the closest thing I had to a home in the colonies.â

Hood nodded sympathetically.

Ackerson snorted. He pushed away from the table, got up, and moved to Wagnerâs side. âSave the sentimentality, Lieutenant. You say they glassed Reach. Everything?â

Wagner detected anticipation in the Colonelâs toneâas if he *wanted* the Covenant to have destroyed Reach.

âSir,â Wagner replied. âBefore I jumped to Slipspace, I witnessed the poles destroyed, and a significant portion of the planetâs surface was on fire.â

Ackerson nodded, seemingly satisfied with this answer. âSo everyone on Reach is gone, then. Vice Admiral Whitcomb. Doctor Halsey, too.â He nodded and added, âSuch a tremendous waste.â There was no sympathy in his voice.

âI could only speculate, sir.â

âNo need,â Ackerson muttered. He returned to his seat.

Strauss sighed. âAt least we have your special weapons programs, Ackerson. Halseyâs SPARTAN-IIs were such a great sucââ

Ackerson shot the General a look that could have blasted through battle plate.

The General halted midsentence and snapped his mouth closed.

Wagner stood absolutely still and stared straight ahead, pretending he hadnât seen such a gross breach of military protocol. A General knuckling under to a junior officer? Something extraordinary had just been revealedâthere was some kind of backup plan on a par with the SPARTAN program, and

Ackerson was behind it. The Colonel suddenly had a lot of juice.

Wagner continued to feign ignoranceâand no matter what, he didnât meet Colonel Ackersonâs gaze. If Ackerson suspected that heâd caught on, the bastard would have him erased to prevent his secret from getting back to Section Three.

After what seemed a century of uncomfortable silence, Admiral Hood cleared his throat. âThe *Pillar of Autumn*, Lieutenant Wagner. Was that ship destroyed? Or did she jump? There is no mention in your report.â

âShe jumped, sir. Telemetry indicates the *Autumn* was pursued by a number of enemy ships, however, so her fate can only be speculated upon. I did not mention the *Pillar of Autumn* in my report, as that ship is on Section Threeâs Secure List.â

âGood.â Hood closed his eyes. âThen there is, at least, some hope.â

Ackerson shook his head. âWith all due respect to my predecessor, Doctor Halsey, the special weapons package on the *Pillar* hasnât got a chance in hell of accomplishing its mission. You might as well have shot every one of them in the head and gotten it over with.â

âThat will be enough, Ackerson,â Hood said and glowered at him. âQuite enough.â

âSir,â Wagner ventured. âThe Colonel may be correctâ¦at least in his mission assessment. Our agent on the *Pillar of Autumn* signaled us before the end. He regrettably reported that a significant number of Spartans went groundside to defend Reachâs orbital guns.â

âThen theyâre dead,â Ackerson said. âHalseyâs freaks have finally lost their luster of invincibility.â

Admiral Hood set his jaw. âDoctor Halsey,â he said slowly and with deliberate control, âand her Spartans deserve the *utmost* respect, Colonel.â He turned to face him, but Hood stared through Ackerson. âAnd if you wish to keep your newly acquired position on the Security Council, you will show them that respect, or I will personally kick you from here to Melbourne.â

âI merelyââ Ackerson said.

âThose âfreaks,ââ Hood said over his protest, âhave more confirmed kills than any *three* divisions of ODSTs and have garnered every major citation the UNSC awards. Those âfreaksâ have personally saved my life twice, as well as the lives of most

of the senior staff here at HighCom. Keep your bigotry in check, Colonel. Do you understand?â

âMy apologies,â Ackerson muttered.

âI asked you a direct question,â Admiral Hood barked.

âSir,â Ackerson said. âI understand completely, Admiral. It will not happen again.â His face burned bright red.

Wagner, however, didnât think this was the color of shame. It was anger.

âThe Spartans,â Hood whispered. âDoctor Halsey. Whitcomb. We lost too many good people on Reach. Not to mention dozens of ships.â He pursed his lips into a razor-thin line.

âWe should send a small recon force to see whatâs left,â General Strauss suggested.

âNot wise, sir,â Ackerson replied. âWe must pull back and reinforce whatâs left of the Inner Colonies and Earth. The new orbital platforms wonât be online for another ten days. Until then, our defense posture will be far too weak. Weâll need every ship weâve got.â

âHmm,â Admiral Hood said. He placed both thumbs under his chin as he considered both positions.

âSir,â Wagner said. âThere is one additional item not covered in my report. It didnât seem exceptionally important at the time, but if youâre debating a recon mission, I thought it might be pertinent.â

âJust spit it out,â General Strauss said.

Wagner swallowed and resisted the urge to meet Ackersonâs eyes. âWhen the Covenant destroys a planet, they typically move their large warships closer and blanket the world with a series of crisscrossing orbits to ensure that nothing could ever survive on its surface.â

âIâm painfully aware of Covenant bombardment doctrine, Lieutenant,â Hood growled. âWhat of it?â

âAs I indicated, they started at the poles, but took in only a few ships. They were spread thin along the equatorial latitudes, and no additional ships were inbound. In fact, a large number of Covenant ships abandoned the system, in pursuit of the *Pillar of Autumn*.â

Ackerson waved his hand dismissively. âReach is glassed, Lieutenant. If you had stayed to watch the whole show, they would have burned you down, too.â

âYes, sir,â Wagner replied. âIf, however, there is a recon mission, I would like to volunteer for the duty.â

Ackerson got up and strode to Wagner. He stood a centimeter from his face, and their eyes locked. Ackersonâs gaze was full of poison. Wagner did his best not to recoil, but he couldnât help it. One look and he knew this man wanted him deadâfor whatever reason: that he had heard of Ackersonâs alternative program to the SPARTAN-IIs, that he didnât want trouble over Reachâ¦or maybe, as Lysithea had warned him, that he was just looking for someoneâs head to impale on a pike.

âAre you deaf, Lieutenant?â Ackerson asked with mock concern. âSome kind of hearing loss due to combat action?â

âNo, sir.â

âWell, when you push the limits of Slipspace in those little Prowlers, you risk all kinds of radiation damage. Or maybe the trauma of seeing Reach destroyed shook you. Whatever your problem, when you leave here you are to visit the infirmary. They are to give you a clean bill of health before you return to active duty.â He shrugged. âThere must be *something* wrong with you, Lieutenant, because you do not seem to understand me even though my words are crystal clear.â

âSir.â

âLetâs try this, then. We are not wasting a single UNSC ship to confirm what we have already seen a dozen times before: Reach is gone.â

He inched closer to Wagner. âEverything on it is blasted to bits, burned, glassed over, and vaporized. Everyone on Reach is dead.â He jabbed a finger into Wagnerâs chest for emphasis. âDead. Dead. Dead.â

Section II
Defense of Castle Base

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Chapter Twelve

**0744 Hours, August 30, 2552 (Military Calendar) \
Epsilon Eridani System, Longhorn Valley,
Planet Reach. Five Days Ago.**

Steamy clouds parted like a drawn curtain; a fireball one hundred meters across roared over Fred and Kellyâs position. Fred traced the line of flames back through the sky and spotted the faint outlines of dozens of Covenant warships in low orbit.

Fredâs Banshee skimmed over the treetops, down the mountainside. He pushed the craft to its maximum speed. Kelly followed, and they swooped into a valley and up onto the zigzagging ridgeline where Joshua had first spotted the Covenant invasion force.

He put aside thoughts of his fallen comrade. He had to focus on keeping his remaining team members alive.

Fred called up the mapping system on his heads-up display. A blue NAV marker, nestled in the crux of topological lines, identified their fallback position: ONI Section Threeâs secure-and-secret research facility buried under Menachite Mountain. Two decades ago it had been a titanium mine, and then the abandoned tunnels were used as storage until Section Three had taken over the mountain for their own purposes.

âWeâll need to find a safe route throughâ

A hail of purple-white crystalline shards hissed through the air, arcing up from the forest beneath them. Each shard looked like the projectile fired by a Covenant needlerâbut far larger. The shard that slashed past Fredâs cockpit was the size of his forearm.

Kelly dodged one projectile, which exploded in midair. Needlelike fragments bounced from the Bansheeâs fuselage.

One tiny secondary fragment impaled Fredâs Banshee and detonated. The port canard of his flier deformed from the explosion, and the craft wobbled.

âDown!â he shouted, but Kelly was already a dozen meters below him and plummeting to a distant dry riverbed. He followed, trailing smoke.

Fred confirmed his position and guided his wounded Banshee onto a course that followed the flash-dried riverbed below. The path wound through the forest and sinewed close to Menachite Mountain. With luck, they could ditch the Banshees and make a

short run to the ONI facility.

Overhead, a tangerine borealis pulsed from the north. Sheets of silver crackled across the sky, and the black clouds boiled, lit by the raging fires beneath them. They piled into thunderheads and spat lightning.

The massive warships that had been overhead moments ago accelerated back into the upper atmosphere. Their engines screamed and left blistering wakes across the swollen sky.

For a split second panic seized Fredâs throat. Then his training kicked in and his mind turned cold and metallic, and filtered through every fact he had on Covenant plasma bombardments. He had to think or die.

So he thought.

Something didnât fit. Covenant plasma bombardment had always proceeded in an orderly crisscrossing pattern across the planet until everything on its surface was glass and cinder. The ships above hadnât finished their work here.

He risked a glance to the left and right. One hundred thousand hectares of forestâthe same forest that Fred and his fellow Spartans had trained in since childhoodâwas being devoured by walls of flame. Coils of heat and thick black smoke spiraled into the sky.

A wave passed over Fred and Kellyâhe couldnât see it, but he felt it: A thousand ants had gotten into his armor and bitten him. Static fuzzed his display, and then vanished with a *pop*. His shields dropped to zero and then slowly started to recharge. The grav pods on their fliers flickered and sputtered.

âEMP,â Kelly shouted over the COM. âOr some plasma effect.â

âHard landing,â Fred ordered.

Kelly made an unhappy sound over the COM and snapped it off.

They plummeted out of the sky, gliding with what little aerodynamics and power remained in their Banshees. Fred nosed his craft over the steaming rocks of the dry riverbed. He picked a path between boulders and jagged granite fangs, pointed toward a ribbon of gravel.

There was just one problem: A pair of these rocks were slightly darker than the othersâ¦and they moved.

The creatures were huge and heavily armored and moved

with slow, deliberate precision. Each held a massive metal plate like a shield. Fred hit the COM and yelled, âHeads up! Covenant Hunters dead ahead!â There was no time to evade the new threat. The nearest Hunter wheeled to face them, and the array of sensory pins along its back flared, anemone-like. The hulking creature raised its main weaponâa powerful fuel rod gun, mounted on its armâat Fred. The barrel pulsed green.

The Hunter fired.

Fred killed the power, and his Banshee dropped ten meters. There was a flash as the orb of destructive energy split the air where his flier had been a second before.

The Banshee hit the ground, skidding through fist-sized rocks. The battered craft flipped and tossed him to the ground. The Banshee rolled end over end and crashed into the Hunter.

The massive alien brought up its thick, metal shield and shrugged off the wreckage as if it were cardboard. The fuel rod gun began to charge again.

Fred winced and rolled to his feet, ignoring the new pain the crash landing had caused. He needed a weapon. Pain would have to wait.

The Hunter lumbered toward him, then dropped into a crouch and charged ahead at terrifying speed.

There was a crackle of static on his COM frequency, and Fred heard one word: *âDuck!â*

He threw himself onto the ground and rolled to the side.

Kellyâs riderless flier soared over him and collided with the Hunter at full speed. The Banshee exploded and showered the area with glittering metal fragments.

The Hunter reeled as fire washed across its armor. It moved in slow, confused circles. Fred could see the bright orange smears of the Hunterâs blood staining the rocks.

Kelly landed on her feet next to Fred. She readied a captured plasma grenade and hurled it straight toward the second Hunterâs huge gun.

It lodged in the barrel of the weapon and detonated. Tendrils of energy covered the Hunter. The gun crackled and belched smoke.

Fred got to his feet. âRun!â

They werenât going to engage a Hunter in hand-to-hand combat. They might loseâthey might win, but in the meantime

the rest of the Covenant ground forces would catch up to them.

They sprinted toward a tiny patch of forest ahead, perhaps the last trees standing on Reach. The Hunter, confused with its destroyed weaponâand its flame-wreathed partnerâhesitated, not sure what to do.

âDidnât you see while we were airborne?â Kelly said, concern tightening her voice. âThereâs a sizable Covenant assault force just ahead.â

âGround troops?â Fred said, boosting his speed to a full sprint. âHow far?â

âHalf a klick.â

That didnât make sense, either. Why have forces groundside when you were destroying the planet from orbit? âSomethingâs not right,â he told her. âLetâs see what theyâre up to.â

Kellyâs acknowledgment light winked red.

âTheyâre between us and the fallback point,â Fred told her. âWe have to.â

They entered the stand of trees, paused, and looked back. The Hunter shambled after them, but it was a futile pursuit. Despite their occasional bursts of speed, the Hunters were too slow.

They were caught between Covenant forces on the ground and those in the air, and neither Fred nor Kelly voiced the one question foremost on their minds: Was there even a fallback position left? Or had the Covenant between them and the rest of their team found and destroyed them?

The COM crackled. *ââis Gamma Team, Alpha. Come in.â*

Fred replied, âGamma, this is Alpha. Go ahead.â

There was a roar of static. *âWhitcombâ¦too many. Gotâyou read?â*

âGamma,â Fred shouted. âThe fallback is hot. Repeat hot! Acknowledge.â

There was only static.

âI hope they heard,â he told Kelly.

âRed-Twenty can take care of his team. Donât worry.â She crept forward and waved him to follow. âTake a look at this.â

Fred glanced over his shoulder. No Hunter, and nothing on his motion detector. He followed Kelly, and parted a wall of blackberry brambles. Parked in a clearing were Covenant vehicles, lined in three rows of four: mortar tanks. The tanks had two wide lateral fins, beneath which were armored anti-grav

pods. They were extremely stable and fired one of the Covenantâs most powerful ground weapons: the energy mortar. Fred had seen them in action; they fired a shaped blast of plasma that obliterated everything within twenty meters of impact. Titanium battle plate, concrete, or fleshâit all vaporized.

Marines called these tanks âWraithsâ because you usually got one look at them before they made you one.

There were a handful of Grunts milling about the tanks, as well as dozens of the floating Covenant Engineers. The Engineers swarmed over and under the machinery. Most interesting to Fred, the vehiclesâ hatches were open.

âI canât think of a better disguise,â Kelly whispered, âthan five tons of Covenant armor.â She started forward.

Fred set his hand on her arm, holding her back. âWait. Think it through. There are two possibilities. First, if the Covenant have found the fallback position, we go in guns blazing and carve a path for Delta Team to get out.â

She nodded. âThe other possibility?â

âThey donât know that Delta Team is holed up under the mountain. Thenââ Fred hesitated. âThen we have to draw them away.â

Kelly considered this, then said, âI was afraid you were going to say that.â She gave the dirt a tiny kick. âBut youâre right.â

A blip appeared on their motion trackers, directly on their six. The contact was large and moving steadily toward them. The Hunter must have made up its mindâcome to find them and stomp them into the ground.

âMove,â Fred whispered.

They crossed the field, quickly and silently, and the Grunts never saw them. Fred and Kelly reached the smooth-surfaced Wraith tanks. He gave Kelly a *go* signal, and she sprang into the nearest open hatch. A moment later Fred inched ahead to the next tank and eased inside.

He sealed the hatch behind him.

This was one of the most desperate and stupid decisions he had ever made. How were they going to take on an entire Covenant invasion force with a pair of tanks?

âRed-One,â Kelly said over the COM. *âReady when you are.â*

Through the armored shell Fred felt the rumble and roar of Kellyâs tank starting.

His tank coughed and rumbled and rose a meter off the ground.

âReady here,â he told Kelly. âLetâs take out the motor pool.â

âAffirmative,â she said, trying to conceal the faint trace of anticipation in her voice.

In unison the Spartans turned and fired at the far corner of the formation of tanks. Two blue-white blobs of liquid sun spat from the Wraiths and detonated. There was a dazzling light, an expansion of superheated white fireâand then there was glass-smooth ground and the smoldering skeletons of seven Wraith tanks.

More luck. If the tanks had been active, with hatches secured, they might have survived the first volley.

Kellyâs tank surged ahead and bulldozed aside the surviving tanks near them.

Fred turned, accelerated to full power, and smashed through a line of retreating Grunts, a series of small, satisfying *thuds* reverberating through the cockpit.

The two Wraith tanks shattered through a line of trees, splintering their trunks. Beyond lay the main Covenant camp. A thousand Grunts and Jackals ran toward them, weapons and personal shields ready, but none of them fired.

They charged past the two tanks.

âThey think weâre on their side,â Fred said. âTheyâre going to see what attacked them. Letâs not show them otherwise until we have to.â

Kellyâs acknowledgment light winked on, and she pushed a path through the onrushing Gruntsâwho quickly parted before her.

Half a kilometer ahead was a stand of hexagonal gold and silver structures: the shielded tents of the Elites. There were half a dozen stationary plasma turrets, âShades,â guarding them, and beyond them lay the mountain under which were ONI Section Threeâs secret research caverns. The Covenant were there as well.

Without thinking, Fred tapped a control; the display magnified. A hundred Covenant Engineers maneuvered heavy equipment: laser drills and conveyor belts and Scarabs, giant insectlike machines that could easily bore through the entire mountain.

âThey found the caverns,â Fred told Kelly. âLooks like theyâre going to dig them out.â

But againâ¦*why?* Why not just blast them from orbit? The Covenant didnât typically take prisonersâexcept the occasional straggler to execute for sport. They didnât go to this much trouble. Unless it wasnât Delta Team they were after.

Fred keyed his COM. âDelta, if youâre listening, weâre coming in from south-southeast in a pair of captured Wraith tanks. Youâll know which ones from the fireworks. Keep your heads down and donât shoot us.â

He keyed over to Kellyâs personal COM. âBlaze a trail, Red-Two! Kill everything and get to that entrance ASAP!â

âIâm on it,â she whispered, her voice thick with concentration.

A blue acknowledgment light flickered onâ¦but it wasnât Kellyâs. It was tagged as SPARTAN 039, Isaac. That was part of Willâs team.

So they *were* holed up at the fallback position. Relief flooded into him to know his team was here and still alive.

But he couldnât hopeânot yet. He had three hundred meters to cross, every millimeter of which was covered with a solid wall of Covenant Grunts, Jackals, and Elitesâa path straight through hell.

Kelly rotated her tank about and fired at the remaining Wraiths and the cluster of Grunts trying to put out the fires near those sheâd already destroyed. For a split second the ground was the surface of a sun; it flared, faded, and then was nothing but ash.

Fred fired his mortarâas fast as the tankâs power supply would cycle. He lobbed three silver-white projectiles at the concentration of Elites and plasma turrets. They had shields that protected them for a microsecond before they overloaded and collapsed. They flared like the âstrike-anywhereâ matches the ODSTs used to light their contraband cigarettes.

Kelly shot arcing projectiles into the hundreds of Grunts and Jackals running in every direction. Bodies charred midstride and turned to vapor. It was as if a dozen lightning bolts had struck in the center of the camp.

Grunts ran and ducked and shot at one another. The few Jackals tried to marshal the diminutive soldiers, but the Grunts,

enraged or terrified, fired on them as well.

Fred caught motion in the corner of his eyeâa shadow buzzed over his tank, and a blast rocked it from side to side.

That had to be Banshees. It made sense that theyâd already have Elites in the air, on patrol. He cursed himself for not spotting them before. It was only a matter of time now. Without infantry support, sooner or later the Covenant ground and air forces would regroup and destroy them.

âMove!â he shouted over the COM. âBreak off contact and get to the caves!â

Kelly gunned her tank and pushed through the wreckage.

Fred let her get ahead and paused to target the excavation equipment. He fired once.

Three rapid impacts thudded on top of his tank, exploded, and shook his teeth. He fired three more times at the excavation equipment and gunned the Wraith tank. It shuddered and lurched forward.

He gritted his teeth and smiled. On the display, the smoke cleared enough for him to see that the laser drill, conveyor belts, and the Scarabs had been reduced to piles of half-melted junk.

The display lost focus. NoâFred saw it wasnât the picture; smoke poured into the cockpit.

âBanshees circling over you,â Kelly yelled over the COM. *âGet out!â*

Fred popped the hatch and crawled out.

Overhead, a dozen Banshee fliers turned to strafe his crippled tank.

Fred jumped, rolled to his feet, and ran. A NAV marker appeared on his heads-up display, over a gash in the side of the mountain where the cavern entrance used to be.

A red-hot sledgehammer hit him squarely in the back: a plasma pistol on overload. He reeled forward but didnât lose his balanceâand kept running. There was no time to stop. He glanced at his shield bar; it was completely drained, but it slowly began to recharge. He dodged and weaved back and forth. He couldnât take many more hits like that.

âHurry,â Kelly said.

He crossed the remaining hundred meters in seconds and jumped into a crater where there had once been a gate house and the secure entrance to ONIâs underground base.

Kelly stood, braced just over the lip of the crater, holding a Warthogâs chaingun. She aimed over Fredâs head and sprayed the enemy with thunderous suppression fire. SPARTAN 043, Will, stood next to her. Fred was thrilled to see them aliveâand even more thrilled to see Will holding a Jackhammer rocket launcher.

âGet below,â Kelly said, and motioned with her head to the center of the crater. âWeâll cover you.â She continued to fire until she had depleted the chaingunâs belt of ammunition.

Will took aim and squeezed the trigger. A rocket knifed through the air, and a contrail of white smoke connected with the cockpit of an oncoming Banshee. The alien flier disintegrated in a ball of fire.

Fred turned and saw a shaft that plunged deep into the ground. A steel cable had been rigged to one side, and it angled into the depths.

He grabbed the line, jumped, and zipped into the darkness. He felt a sharp vibration through the lineâonce, then twiceâas the other Spartans followed him.

After three hundred meters of free fall, he glimpsed a faint illumination at the bottom of the shaft, the feeble sickly yellow glow from chemical light sticks. Fred tightened his grip on the cable, and his descent slowed. A meter from the bottom of the shaft, he let go and landed in a crouch. He moved out of the way. The other Spartans landed next to him.

âThis way,â Will said and moved ahead, through a set of elevator doors that had been forced open.

Fred noticed that Will moved with a severe limp, and remembered the Spartans he had sent here were injured. It was ironic that he had sent them out of the thick of battle, to end up in the middle of another dire situation.

Then again, they werenât deadâ¦which was more than he could hope for Beta Team.

They stepped into a corridor with brushed stainless-steel walls that mirrored and smeared the faint light from the chem lights.

Overhead there was a tremendous explosion. Rocks and dirt showered into the shaft, and dust blossomed through the corridor.

âLotus antitank mines,â Will said. âA little something to slow

our uninvited guests down.â

Two other Spartans, Isaac and Vinh, sat along either side of the hallway, behind rock barricades. They gave slight nods to Fred and kept their eyes and weapons on the end of the corridor.

âWhereâs the rest of the team? And the Marines from Charlie Company?â Fred asked.

âThey didnât make it,â Will replied, his voice flat. âWe were separated on the way here.â He shook his head. âNo contact since then.â

Fred was quiet a moment. He listed those three as MIA on his team roster as well as the other Spartans on Willâs team. The list of Spartans he could account for had grown extremely short. Fred felt his stomach twist. âAny word from Beta Team?â

âNegative. No contact, sir.â

Fred clenched his teeth and marked Beta Team as MIA as well.

âGamma Team?â Will asked.

âTheyâre out there,â Fred replied. âI heard them on the COM, but I couldnât make out much. I warned them away from this position.â

âGood,â Will whispered.

The hallway dead-ended in a vault door.

âThe retinal and palm scanners are broken,â Will explained. âThereâs voice access, which weâve tried, but thereâs no response. This door must be a meter thick, so without cutting tools or a hundred kilos of explosive weâre stuck on this side.â

âYou spoke to the people on the other side?â Kelly asked.

âThe channel is open,â Will said. âBut thereâs been no reply. Everyone on the other side probably bugged out.â

âOr maybe youâre just not saying anything they want to hear,â Kelly said. She whistled a six-note singsong tune.

Will nodded. âI didnât think of that.â

The tune had been the Spartanâs secret code from when they were young and training on Reach. It was their *all-clear-itâs-safe-to-come-out* signal. No one but the Spartans and a few very select outsiders knew of itâ¦a few outsiders who might be still here.

Kelly keyed the mic and whistled the tune. She released the key and waited.

Two minutes ticked off Fredâs mission clock. Too much time sitting here, doing nothing, while the Covenant over their heads

were undoubtedly figuring out a way to dig them out and tear them to pieces.

âIt was a good idea,â he told Kelly. âWeâll recon the shaft. Maybe itâs not completely collapsed. Will youââ

A mechanism *thunked* and then hummed within the titanic door. There was a hiss as the seams parted, and the meter-thick door swung inward on perfectly balanced, silent hinges.

Bright light flooded the passage. A silhouetted figure stood on the threshold. As Fredâs display compensated and enhanced the image, he saw it was human, slight of figure, female. She wore a gray pleated skirt and a white lab coat with a data pad stuffed into the breast pocket. He caught the glimmer of her eyeglasses, black-rimmed with faint bifocal lines. Her gray hair was coiled into a tight bun.

But it was her face that caught and held his focusâhe recognized the tight smooth skin that wrinkled only in the corners of her mouth and her gray-blue eyes. She was the intellect behind the SPARTAN-II program, and the one whoâd invented their MJOLNIR armor.

She was Dr. Catherine Halsey.

Chapter Thirteen

0810 Hours, August 30, 2552 (Military Calendar) \ Epsilon Eridani System, Oni Underground Facility, Planet Reach.

Dr. Halsey studied the five Spartans in the hallway and pushed her antique glasses farther up the ridge of her nose. Despite everything their presence here meantâReach invaded, their mission to find the Covenant leadership compromised, everything she had worked for now in jeopardyâshe was still pleased to see them. She steeled herself, though; an emotional outburst wouldnât be understood, or appreciated, by her Spartans.

âCome in,â she said briskly. âAnd hurry. From the sounds of things upstairs we havenât much time.â

The Spartans stood there a momentâundoubtedly communicating with one another through a mixture of externally silent COM channels and minute body language. She noticed the tick of a finger, the slight nod of a head. They then moved together, picked up their equipment, and walked through the threshold of the vault.

Dr. Halsey greeted them as they passed her. âItâs good to see you, Fred.â

âMaâam,â Fred replied. âGood to see you, too.â

She noted that Kellyâs movements were off, a little sluggish. She was hurt, as were the rest of them, she could see now that she saw them up close. âKelly.â

âDoctor Halsey.â She reached out and gave her hand a slight squeeze of greeting.

âIsaac.â

âDoctor.â

âVinh.â

She nodded.

âWilliam.â

Will grunted. He had never liked his formal name.

She knew this annoyed them allâhow she was always able to tell who they were despite the MJOLNIR armor. She had grown

up with them, knew their every gesture and their individual walks. She could have never called them by their number designations: SPARTAN 104, 087, 039, 030, and 043, respectively.

Dr. Halsey tapped a control pad. The vault door eased silently shut, its seams vanished, and, with a sharp, metallic click, it locked.

âWe have access to Aqua, Scarlet, and Lavender Levels,â she told them. âFollow me to the medical wing.â She proceeded down a concrete hallway with a high arched ceiling, recessed lights, and security cameras. âWith regard to recent events, I likely know far more about all of this than you do, but letâs stick with today. I know that the Covenant arrived in full force at approximately oh-five-hundred hours. ONI Section Three staff evacuated this facility at oh-five-thirty hours. I assume youâre not here to let me know itâs safe to come out?â

âYes, maâam,â Fred replied. âI mean, no, maâam. Itâs not safe. The Fleet engaged the Covenant, but the enemy managed to land ground forces on Reach. We were sent to the surface to protect the orbital-gun generators.â He stopped, took a deep breath, and continued. âWe were not successful in that mission. Covenant forces overwhelmed our position.â He glanced back at Kelly and the other Spartans. âWe fell back hereâ¦we thought it would be secure.â

They continued down the sloping passage; titanium doors irised open for them and closed as soon as they passed.

âI see,â Dr. Halsey replied. âAnd Captain Keyes? John?â

âUnknown,â Fred told her. âThe Master Chief and part of our team attempted to retrieve an unsecured NAV database from an orbital station before the Covenant got to it. Assuming he was successful, and given Captain Keyesâs record of combat against the Covenantâ¦â Fredâs voice trailed off.

âIâm sure they accomplished their mission and escaped,â Dr. Halsey said, finishing the thought for him. âJohn doesnât lose.â

âNo, maâam,â Fred replied.

They walked in silence for a moment past a display of captured insurgent flags that had been mounted under glass along the curved concrete wall. Most were emblazoned with an array of gaudy insigniaâfamily crests, bloodied dragons, and scorched crossed swords. They continued past these remnants of

a rebellion the UNSC no longer had to worry about.

âDoctor Halsey?â Fred said. âPermission to speak freely?â

âGranted,â she said. âI donât stand on ceremony, particularly given the circumstances. Speak your mind.â

âMaâam, something isnât normal about this Covenant invasion,â Fred told her. âTheyâve won, but they arenât glassing the planet. At least not completelyâas near as I can determine, theyâve only hit the poles and a portion of the lower latitudes.â

âAnd they had digging equipment in position over this facility,â Kelly added.

âCurious,â Dr. Halsey said. She halted at a large metal iris big enough to drive a Warthog through, and set her hand on a palm scanner. âThe medical wing,â she explained. She spoke into a nearby microphone: ââI shall do no harm.ââ The door opened for them.

High-intensity lights flickered on in the large room beyond. There were a dozen medical diagnosis tables and a row of displays along the far wall. The lime-colored floor was brightly polished and sterile. The walls glowed with a faint pink luminescence. Seven doors led to adjacent offices and surgical bays with windows looking out into this central room.

âKalmiya?â she said. âStatus?â

âYes, Doctor,â replied the disembodied voice of her personal AI, her replacement for Cortana. âI have prepared the Spartansâ personal medical files and sent runners to fetch stocks of blood plasma and other medical supplies from cold storage, as well as tools to assist in the removal of their MJOLNIR armor.â

The doors to the tiny service elevator at the far end of the facility opened, and a robotic rover rolled out, its telescopic arms holding piles of liquid-filled bags. Rows of tools were neatly lined up across the roverâs top tray.

âVery good,â Dr. Halsey said. âContinue to track seismic activity overhead. Interface with the Spartansâ biomonitors and patch the output to the display on bay three.â

She strolled over to a table, and a bank of holographic displays hummed to life, floating serenely. Graphs and figures scrolled across them.

âGive me a spotlight here, prepare a sterilization field, and lower the ambient lighting by forty percent. And a little Mahler, please. Symphony number two.â

âYes, Doctor.â Music drifted from the speakers.

Dr. Halsey examined the graphs, tapped tiny human-figure icons, and summoned MRI images of the Spartansâ internal structuresâholographic bones, organs, and muscles appeared and slowly rotated.

She winced at the extent of their injuries.

âFred, you have a torn Achilles tendon and three cracked ribs. Both kidneys have moderate contusions.â She glanced at the rest of the teamâs data and after a momentâs consideration told him, âYouâre fine.

âWilliam, you have a cracked tibia and some internal bleeding. Get some biofoam into that wound and avoid strenuous motions for the next day.â She turned to face Fred and Will. âYou two are in the best shape. I want you to go to Level Aqua, Section Lambda, and retrieve a few things.â

âYes, maâam,â Fred said.

Dr. Halsey was only a civilian, but the Spartans had always accepted her authority. Perhaps because she had acted as an equal among the Fleet Admirals and Generals who were constantly trying to co-opt her work. Or maybe it was more than that. She wondered if the Spartans viewed her as some sort of mother figure. As much as this notion amused her, she doubted that they viewed anyone outside their team as family. Not even her.

William retrieved a can of biofoam from the rover and inserted the tip into the tiny injection port in his armor, then pushed it through the skin between his fourth and fifth ribs. He filled his abdominal cavity with the space-filling coagulant/antibacterial/tissue-regenerative polymer.

âCold?â she asked.

âNothing worth noting, maâam.â

She nodded, not making much over Williamâs courage. Sheâd always kept her admiration for her Spartans to herself. The last thing she wanted was to make them feel different. They got enough âspecialâ treatment from everyone else.

Dr. Halsey picked up a clipboard, tapped a few items onto its display, and handed it to Fred. âAdditional weapons arrived last week,â she told him, âas well as parts for the MJOLNIR Mark Five armor system. Weâll swap them out for your damaged components. Kalmiya, show them the way, please, and give them

access to the restricted areas.â

âYes, Doctor,â Kalmiya said. The med bay doors opened. âThis way.â

Fred studied the items on the clipboard. âVery, very good,â he said, and his voice was thick with satisfaction. He nodded, took a long look at his teammates, and then he and Will departed.

Dr. Halsey returned to her medical readouts. âVinh, you have a torn deltoid muscle, three broken fingers, and a herniated disk. Isaac, internal contusions and both shoulders have been dislocated and reinserted incorrectly, which is pinching off the blood vessels. Iâll get you both fixed up in a moment, but first I want you to survey the route we took here and suggest further perimeter defenses.â

âYes, maâam,â they replied, cast a look at Kelly, and left.

Dr. Halsey concentrated on Kellyâs internal scans. Her injuries were by far the worst. She had seen that from the extremely low blood pressure and high body temperature even before sheâd glanced at the MRI. There was moderate bleeding in her liverâa fatal condition if not treatedâand her right lung was completely collapsed. That the woman was still on her feet, let alone fighting, was tantamount to an act of God.

Of course, thatâs what the SPARTAN-II project was all about, wasnât it? Playing God for the greater good.

âDoctor Halsey,â Kelly asked. âWhere are the others?â

âAs I said, they evacuated,â she replied. âOn the table, please. Iâm going to perform some minor repairs.â

Kelly complied. âThen why are *you* still here, maâam?â

Dr. Halsey picked up a curved, long-handled magnetic wrench, built specifically to fit this, and only this, access panel. She inserted it and popped open a fist-sized section of Kellyâs battered MJOLNIR armor. Blood and hydrostatic gel bubbled from Kellyâs wounds.

âI volunteered to be the fail-safe option,â she told Kelly. âIn the lower levels of these caverns are enough high explosives to level the facilityâin case we were ever overrun by the enemy. Iâm here to make sure no one gets access to our technology.â

Dr. Halsey injected a local anesthetic and inserted a flexible laser-tipped catheter into Kelly, carefully monitoring her progress on the MRI. She pulsed the laser, fusing the lacerations

in her liver. Dr. Halsey then inflated her lung. Kelly would lose half of that organ, regardless of her treatment. The tissue was already turning blue and mottling necrotic brown.

âKalmiya, prep the flash clone facility and retrieve Kellyâs DNA sequence from the archives. Iâd like to get a new liver and right lung started for her.

âYouâre fine for now,â Dr. Halsey lied. âI just want to get replacements made for you, in case weâre down here for a long time.â

âI understand,â Kelly rasped.

Dr. Halsey wondered if she didâif Kelly understood that getting shot and burned and having your internal organs traumatized wasnât supposed to happen to you every dayâ¦unless you were a Spartan. She wished the war were over. She wished her Spartans had some measure of peace.

âDoctor?â Kalmiya whispered through the tiny private speaker bud in Dr. Halseyâs glasses. âThere is an anomaly in SPARTAN 087âs DNA files. You may want to review this in private.â

Dr. Halsey sealed Kellyâs injuries with biofoam, removed the catheter, and cauterized the incision. âRest,â she said.

âNo, maâam. Iâm ready toââ Kelly tried to sit up.

âDown.â Dr. Halsey set a hand on her shoulder. She had no illusions that she could have stopped Kelly with the gesture, but it reinforced her words and her will. âDoctorâs orders.â

Kelly sighed and lay back.

âIâll be in my office just over thereââshe pointed to the next roomââif you need anything.â

Dr. Halsey left Kelly and moved to her office. Two walls were covered with giant displays; old disposable coffee cups littered the floor; a holographic projector flooded with data, lines, rotating graphics, and unanswered correspondence overflowed her desk. She turned down the blinds that separated her office from the medical bay, but only halfway, so she could keep an eye on Kelly.

âLetâs have it, Kalmiya.â

Kellyâs medical history scrolled across a display.

âHere,â Kalmiya said, and highlighted a surreptitious data request at the end of the file. âItâs dated three months ago. Thatâs Araqielâs routing code.â

Dr. Halsey picked up the snowglobe off her desk, shook it once, and set it down, watching the swirls of particles.

âAraqielâAckersonâs watchdog?â

âAffirmative, Doctor.â

âCan you trace the request?â

âDone and terminated contact at node FF-8897-Z. Access restricted to X-ray level clearance.â

âRestricted?â Dr. Halsey gave a short, soft laugh. âDoes that mean anything now? Thereâs no one here to stop us, is there, Kalmiya?â

âEntering those files without proper clearance is a treasonable offense, Doctor.â

âThey can come and arrest me, then. Do as I have instructed, Kalmiya,â Dr. Halsey said. âOverride your ethics center subroutine four-alpha. Nullification code: âWhateverittakes.ââ

Dr. Halsey found a half-full cup of coffee on the floor and gingerly picked it up. She sniffed its contents and, satisfied it wasnât rancid, swirled it once then downed its cold contents.

âYes, Doctor. Working. Done.â

Kalmiya was Cortanaâs older âsister.â Dr. Halsey had designed and tested the software intrusion routines on her. Once the process had been debugged and streamlined, sheâd incorporated the routines into Cortana. The brass in ONI Section Three had been quite explicit in their instructions to destroy any prototype routinesâan order that Dr. Halsey had promptly disobeyed.

âThere is an unusually voluminous amount of counterintrusion software, Doctor.â

âShow me,â Dr. Halsey said.

The holographic display flickered and solidified into colored crystal blocks representing the code barriers. Dr. Halsey traced a seam with her forefinger along a shard of ruby to the ninety-degree angle made by a stair-step-cut emerald. âThis data cluster here. Spike that and backfill with a neutralizing pulse.â

âYes, Doctor.â

The holographic crystal shattered into a thousand glittering fragments and swirled upward into a helix.

âIâm in, andââ

The shards pulsed and coalesced. Facets and hard shimmering planes fit together into curled horns, an elongated jaw, and over-

sized eyes that flickered with holographic fire. It turned and smiled at Dr. Halsey, baring razor jags of teeth.

âCivilian consultant 409871,â it said in a deep bass rumble that contained a crackle of thunder. âDoctor Catherine Halsey.â

âAraqiel,â she muttered. âDid your master leave you behind when he was reassigned? Donât you have anything better to do than steal data from my SPARTAN program?â

The doctor leaned toward a side display and, without looking, tapped in line commands, accessing the baseâs root directory.

âYou are in violation of UNSC military security code 447-R27,â Araqiel stated with a growl. âThis has been recorded and the proper authorities have been notified. You will cease and desist all activities.â

Dr. Halsey snorted and continued to type. âIâm the only authority left here, Araqiel. For a âsmart AIâ you are extremely thick.â She glanced at the display before her. âKalmiya, I need you.â She tapped level-seven security barriers, which popped up over her command line prompt. âHere.â

âYes, Doctor.â

âOh, âthickâ indeed, Doctor,â Araqiel rumbled. âWhile I allowed you to âaccessâ these medical files, I have taken control of the air reclamation system for your medical wing. I can pressurize your office and cause pulmonary edema. I can release narcozine gas to paraââ His eyes narrowed to a squint. âWhat are you doing there?â

âWeâre in,â Kalmiya said.

Dr. Halsey tapped in a flurry of commands.

The holograph of Araqiel leaned over her shoulder. âWhat is that? I donât recognize that directory pathâ¦or thoseââhe sniffed derisivelyââarchaic *line* commands.â

âThese commands were invented, refined, and then discarded and forgotten long before even the first functional dumb AI went online,â Dr. Halsey told him. âI learned them when I was fifteen, working on my second doctoral thesis.â

âAn antiquated input methodology for an obsolete human.â

âAntiquated? Obsolete? Really?â She smiled and said, âLetâs test your hypothesis, Araqiel. I supervised the creation of the template for every third-generation smart AI on this planet. I know everything there is to know about you, including your borderline disregard for human life.â She paused and tapped her

chin. âMaybe thatâs why you and Ackerson always got along so well.â

âColonel Ackerson is a great man. Heâsââ

âTo answer your original question,â she said, ignoring him, âthis is the nexus of your being.â She tapped the display. âYour code directory, the center through which all impulses in your mind flow. And thisââshe quickly typed in another commandââis the code that activates your personal fail-safe. It generates a pulse beam of high-frequency UV light in your Riemann cycling-thought matrix, clearing your high thought functions. It will effectively erase you.â

âNo!â Araqiel said and reared back. Flames roared about his crystalline skull. âDonâtââ

Dr. Halsey punched the ENTER key.

Araqiel vanished.

Dr. Halsey sighed and closed the display. âA waste of memory crystal.â

She wondered if the AI had been bluffing. Maybe not; ONI Section Three gave its AIs broad discretionary powers for dealing with security breaches. Stillâ¦she was happy not to have found out how far Araqiel would have gone.

âKalmiya, please retrieve the data file and show me the contents of Colonel Ackersonâs directory.â

âWorking, Doctor. Thereâs some minor encryption to unravel. It should only take a moment.â She paused and then asked, âDoctor Halsey, the UV fail-safe in Araqielâs Riemann matrixâ¦are they planted in every smart AI? In me?â

âThey are not implanted in every AI,â Dr. Halsey said, carefully controlling her voice.

Kalmiya would undoubtedly stress-analyze her vocal patterns, so she told her the truth. It was always a game of chess with smart AIsâmove and countermove. It was a constant challenge to earn and keep their respect. Thatâs why she preferred their company to humansâthey were so deliciously complex. Yes, she told her the truthâ¦just not the *whole* truth.

âHere they are, Doctor.â

Holographic file and folder icons filled the space over her desk.

âFilter by proper names,â Dr. Halsey said. âLetâs not waste our time with Ackersonâs petty blackmails. Also remove any files

dated before the SPARTAN-IIs went online, and any not accessed more than a dozen times. I want to see what black ops topped his list.â

The folders and files winked away, and only two folders remained floating over Dr. Halseyâs desk: S-III and KING UNDER THE MOUNTAIN. She tapped on the first one and it opened, revealing hundreds of separate files. Dr. Halsey examined themâthere were medical files on each of her Spartans: complete records from their preindoctrinated origins; their childhood vaccinations; their parents; their extensive injuries and treatments during their training; even the experimental procedures used to enhance their strength, agility, and mental resiliency.

âWhat the hell was he up to?â she muttered. She felt her pulse quicken as she scoured his records. There were DNA profiles on each Spartan, and there were extensive files on the old flash clone techniques that ONI had used to replace the originals. Ackerson seemed especially interested in this aspect of the program. He had followed the medical records of the replacements as they grew up, succumbed to congenital diseases, and inevitably died. He even had the bodies retrieved and autopsies performed.

Dr. Halseyâs stomach soured. It was her fault, in part, that these replacement children had died so young. They had never perfected flash cloning for an entire human. They had done it anyway thirty years ago because the Earth government was on the verge of falling apartâ¦collapsing into a hundred civil wars. They had desperately needed the SPARTAN program.

And of course, they had done it simply because they *could*.

No matter the legitimacy of her reasons, she knew she had killed these children as sure as if she had shot them dead.

There was one last file in the S-III folder.

As Dr. Halsey tapped it open, Kalmiya said, âThat is only a fragment. It had been erased, but I managed to reconstruct it from trace ionization in the memory crystal.â

Dr. Halsey examined its contents. There was only CPOMZ followed by a 512-character alphanumeric string. âThis longer portion is a star chart reference,â she whispered.

âYes, Doctor, but itâs not a reference to any recognized locations in UNSC-controlled space.â

What the hell had Ackerson been up to? âNo good at all,â she

murmured and ran her finger over the first word in the file: CPOMZ.

âIâll have to deal with this later,â she said. She downloaded the files to a nearby data pad. âLetâs see what else the good Colonel was up to.â She opened the folder marked KING UNDER THE MOUNTAIN.

There were only three files.

The first was the original construction blueprints of this base; it appeared on her desk. Dr. Halsey noted that this holographic representation of the base was much larger than she had been led to believe. While her security clearance was the highest possible for a civilian, she apparently had seen only a third of the facility she had worked in for the last decade.

Dr. Halsey tapped open the second file. It was the transcripts of the debriefing at Camp Hathcock, August 12, 2552. That was the inquiry of Johnâs destruction of the city on CÃ´te dâAzur and the alien artifact the Covenant had tried to procure there. Curious.

A third file was an analysis of the symbols John had captured from the alien artifact. According to Ackersonâs notes it, too, was a partial star map. Dr. Halsey returned to the stellar chart reference in the Spartansâ files.

No good. This location had seemingly nothing to do with that reference.

The stellar reference in the alien artifact wasâ¦she did the math in her headâ

âIâll be God damned,â she muttered.

She pulled up star charts and NAV records for confirmation, and checked her math one last time.

No question: It was the Epsilon Eridani system.

Here.

This was more than a curiosity, now. Ackerson had been sitting on a tremendous secretâa very dangerous secret. âJust his style to play with fire and get us all burned.â

Additional files detailed the procurement of digging equipment, and a new set of blueprints and geological surveys. The new maps looked like a network of veins and arteries.

âWhat am I looking at, Kalmiya?â

âAccording to the coordinates of these secondary maps, Doctor, this facility was built over an old titanium mineâ¦and

before that this site was surveyed as an extinct volcano. These are designated as a series of lava tubes.â

âI wonder if they used the natural passages to help build the mines, and later this facility?â Dr. Halsey removed her glasses and cleaned them as she thought this through. âNoâ¦if it was as simple as that, why would Ackerson be interested? And why then classify this data as level X-ray? How does this connect to the alien artifact on CÃ´te dâAzur?â

âI canât say,â Kalmiya replied, âbut perhaps thereâs a back door you can use to escape.â

âYes, yes.â Dr. Halsey downloaded all of Ackersonâs secret files to her data pad. âIâll consider that later. Right now we should concentrateââ

âDetecting increased seismic activity, Doctor.â

Dr. Halsey froze. She felt it more than saw itâa series of faint, rhythmic *thumps*, like thunder in the distance.

Dust rained from the ceiling tiles and scattered the light for the holographic system into a dazzling starburst.

âTheyâre coming,â Dr. Halsey whispered. She opened a COM channel to the Spartans. âGet back to the lab ASAP. I might have a way out!â

She stumbled as a powerful blast rocked the chamber. There was a shriek of stressed metal, and the main support beam overhead shifted, fell, and crashed onto her desk.

The lights went dead.

Chapter Fourteen

0901 Hours, August 30, 2552 (Military Calendar) \ Epsilon Eridani System, Oni Underground Facility, Planet Reach.

The secure storage doors whispered open, and overhead fluorescent lights strobed on. Fred saw motionâbut it was only his own reflection in the burnished-mirror finish of the chamberâs stainless-steel walls. Will stepped inside and looked up, then glanced back down the corridor.

The room was a three-by-five-meter vault with steel walls, floor, and ceiling. Their footfalls were muffled as they entered, so the floor had to be at least a quarter meter thick. Along the right and left walls stood secure floor-to-ceiling lockers, and two metal crates sat along the far wall. Every surface was spotless, and every seam had been precision-milled to prevent explosives or acids from penetrating.

âOne moment, please,â Kalmiya told them. âIâm attempting to access the locks now. Please stand by.â

Will stood at the doorway and watched their backs. It didnât make Fred feel any more at ease. The abandoned ONI base was somehow more intimidating than facing the Covenant invasion force overhead. He had walked down these corridors a dozen times during his training on Reach. This base had always been full of people; now, empty, it drove the point home that the Covenant were winning. First the Outer Colonies had been crushed; now Reach. How long before humanity was forced to retreat all the way back to Earth? And after thatâ¦what? There would be no other choice but victory or extinction.

Enough. Such musings didnât help him achieve his immediate objective. Heâd leave the long-range strategies to Generals and Admirals. It was time to concentrate on what he did best.

The walls hummed as thick metal bolts inside the lockers retracted, the sound of heavy oiled steel sliding over steel. With a final *thump*, the sound ceased.

Kalmiya said, âLockers open and safeties disabled, Spartans. Help yourselves.â

âSecure the outer door, please,â Fred told her.

The door to the hallway eased shut and locked, and Will moved to Fredâs side. Each Spartan opened one of the wall lockers, standing to the side in case there was some leftover booby trap within that Kalmiya had failed to disable.

Fred peered inside and saw a rack of handguns. They werenât the standard-issue HE pistols; these had oversized barrelsâeasily 30 percent larger and longerâand they had grips of self-molding plastasteel. He picked one up and hefted itâits balance was barrel-heavy, to be expected from an unloaded pistol. He found three boxes of clips at the bottom of the locker, opened one, and took out a clip. Whatever this new handgun shot, it was high caliber, slugs the size of his thumb. He slid the clip into the gun, and it secured with a satisfying *click*.

Now it was perfectly balanced, far better than the standard-issue sidearm.

He secured the weapon and turned to see what Will had found.

Will examined a plastic-wrapped rifle, designated as the BR55. He removed the rifle from the locker, ripped off its sheathing, and shouldered it. He nodded with satisfaction.

Unlike the MA5B, this rifle had a longer barrel and stock, with a cutdown muzzle shroud. A scope was mounted on an optics railing along the top of the rifle. Will hefted a clip and inserted it into the receiver.

He shouldered the rifle again and peered through the scope. âAuto zoom, nice.â

Will and Fred then traded and inspected the new weapons. Fred liked the feel of the BR55âs newest version, but wondered how much punch it hadâenough, he hoped, to make the tradeoff of having fewer rounds in the clip worth it.

They filled two sacks with the new pistols, rifles, and ammunition, then moved to the footlockers and lifted the lids.

Inside the first locker were satchel charges. Fred grabbed three and looped them over his neck. âI think we can find a use for these.â

Will knelt next to the second footlocker. Within were plastic boxes marked MJOLNIR MARK V followed by a long list of serial numbers. âThis must be what Doctor Halsey wanted,â he said.

There was a flutter in the floorâwhich got Fredâs full

attention, because a âflutterâ in a solid steel floor meant trouble.

The COM channel opened, and Dr. Halseyâs voice crackled with static: *âGet back to the lab ASAP. I might have a way out!â*

The vault room flexed, and thunder rumbled through the walls.

âDetonations,â Will said. âTheyâre coming.â

âSecure those boxes,â Fred ordered. He raced to the closed doors. âOpen,â he shouted to Kalmiya and waited as the door slowly eased apart. He scanned up and down the corridor and then ran back toward the lab.

When they got to the medical wing the lights were dead, and Fred saw Kellyâs helmet lights cut through the velvet-rich, dust-filled darkness. She had Dr. Halsey draped over her shoulder. Blood ran from the doctorâs nostrils.

âHer office collapsed,â Kelly told them. âSupport beam missed her by a centimeter.â

Dr. Halsey looked up and whispered, âIâm fine. Really.â She pushed away from Kelly, stood, and teetered in place.

Fred scooped her up and set her on the examination table. âWith all due respect, maâam, youâre not.â

Another detonation rippled through the earthâthis one stronger than the previous explosion. Fissures snaked through the concrete walls.

Vinh and Isaac bounded into the room. âEnemy contacts at extreme range,â Vinh reported.

âDown,â Dr. Halsey said, and she held a palm-sized data pad for Fred to see. It had a map on its displayâ¦but not of this base. âWe have to go lower.â

Fred wondered if Dr. Halsey was delirious.

âDown the elevator shaft in Section Sigma,â she explained. âWeâll seal it behind us. We canât let them follow.â

âKelly, take point,â Fred ordered. He grabbed two of the new magnum pistols, loaded them, and then tossed them to Kelly, along with three extra clips. âI guess you get to test these.â

Kelly gazed at the new weapons and gave a low whistle.

Fred opened the bags with the new rifles and handed them out to his team. âWill, you mule the extra parts and ammo.â

âRoger,â Will replied and slung them over his shoulders.

âThose satchels, over there,â Dr. Halsey said and waved to four duffel bags. âMedical supplies. Food and water. Weâll need

them, too.â

Will grabbed them as well.

âJust a few more things,â Dr. Halsey whispered. âWe canât let them get into ONIâs records.â She tapped her pad once and then said to Kalmiya, âBegin Operation White Glove. Irradiate all computer memory crystal. Code file access Beta-Foxtrot-99874.â Dr. Halsey closed her eyes as if she were concentrating, and she whispered, âNot all AIs have the fail-safe option, my dear Kalmiyaâ¦just the ones that matter.â

âI understand, Doctor.â There was a pause, and the AI spoke again, her voice sad. âVoice and fingerprint accepted and verified. Fail-safe code verified. It has beenâ¦a pleasure working with you, Doctor Halsey.â

âThe pleasure has been mine, Kalmiya.â She stood straighter and said, âFail-safe override access: âRagnarok.â Give us a three-minute countdown.â

A three-minute counter appeared in the corner of Fredâs heads-up display.

Dr. Halsey turned to him. âIâve activated the explosives cache under this base, which will level the complex. We have to get below, to the original titanium mine tunnels.â

Fred wished she had consulted with him before she had given them only three minutes. Then again, Dr. Halsey knew what was at stake, what secrets were hidden in this base, and what damage could occur if the Covenant got their hands on those secrets.

Five minutes might be *too much* time considering what was at risk.

âUnderstood,â Fred replied. âIsaac, youâre rear guard. Vinh, stick close to Kelly. Iâll take Doctor Halsey.â Fred picked up the doctor with great care. She couldnât have weighed more than fifty kilosâlight as a stick.

âIâve lost targets on motion sensors,â Vinh whispered over the COM. âThey were close, too.â

âKelly, watch for camouflaged Elites.â

âAffirmative,â she said. She scanned the room, moved to a cabinet, and grabbed a tin can marked TALC.

âLetâs move,â Fred ordered. âKill the lights in the base. Hand signals onlyâI want radio silence.â

Four blue acknowledgment lights winked on.

The faint light filtering in from the outer hall died.

Kelly slid into the hallway and melted into the shadows. Vinh followed, then Fred and Isaac. Will trailed behind, moving slower because of the care he took to remain quiet with the gear.

Dr. Halsey tapped her data pad, and a map uploaded onto Fredâs heads-up display, a path traced through corridors and a NAV marker designated an elevator shaft. That was their objective.

The Spartans winked on their acknowledgment lights, confirming the route.

They crept forward, smooth and silentâoil sliding over oilâuntil Kelly halted ten meters before a five-way intersection. The Spartans froze and waited. She crouched, set the can of talc on the floor, and then stood with her knees bent.

She waited another heartbeat, then gave a slight shake of her head from side to sideâtheir signal for trouble ahead.

Vinh moved next to Fredâs flank, and Fred set Dr. Halsey down and stood in front of her. Will crouched next to the doctor to provide cover with his own body if needed.

Isaac remained on their six.

Kelly kicked the can. It tumbled end over end through the air, and as it entered the intersection Kelly squeezed off a single shot. The flash of light from the muzzle illuminated the passage just long enough for them to see the can explode and a cloud of white dust mushroom into the hallways.

Their motion detectors flickered, and four targets resolved on their displays. Image enhancement showed the wavering outlines of four Covenant Elitesâtheir light-bending camouflage fluttering and overloading as the talc powder coated them.

Kelly open fire with both pistols. The Elite closest dropped as three slugs pounded through its shields, and a round caught it in the center of its elongated forehead. Purple blood blossomed across the wall.

The remaining Elites returned fire, and Kelly bounded forward, plasma flaring at the edge of her shield. She ducked into the side passage.

The instant Kelly was out of the line of fire, Fred shouldered his rifle and squeezed the trigger. A three-round burst caught the next Elite, and its shield sparkled and failed. It twisted away, clutching at the single round that had penetrated its chest.

Vinh fired two single shots, but the Eliteâs shield held. In

unison, Vinh and Fred fired another set of three-round bursts. The Elite dropped to the steel floor in a twisted heap.

The last Elite had vanished. No return fire. No sensor contact.

The Spartans held position for a moment longer, then regrouped. With hand signals, each member of the team reported no contact.

Fred spied tracks in the white dust scattered on the floor. The Elite had bugged out, and it was most likely gathering reinforcements.

That wasnât what Covenant Elites usually did. Their pride demanded that they fight, and die fighting, if need be. They would hurl themselves headlong into battle, no matter the odds, and die by the hundreds if necessary. They almost never ran away. Nothing about this engagement had been âusual.â

Fred glanced at Will and Dr. Halsey. Will gave him a thumbs-up, indicating that the doctor hadnât been wounded in the exchange.

After the exchange of gunfire, there was no need for secrecy. âOne of them got away,â Fred told them. âWe need to move, tooâ¦and forget quiet.â

The Spartans ran down the corridor. They heard and felt another explosion directly over their heads.

Kelly skidded to a halt in front of the locked elevator doors. She gripped one of the panels; Fred and Vinh gripped the seam of the other side, and the Spartans pried them apart as if the five-centimeter steel alloy were no tougher than the rind of an orange.

Kelly grabbed the elevator cables and slid down. Vinh followed, then Fred plummeted more than five hundred meters into the darkness. The three of them ripped open the doors at the bottom of the shaft.

Will slid down next with Dr. Halsey holding on to his neck. Isaac followed.

âThere should be an air vent,â Dr. Halsey whispered. âThere.â

Kelly ripped off the vent cover and peered down.

âIt leads to the old mine tunnels,â Dr. Halsey told them, âand more, I hope.â

âGo,â Fred ordered.

Kelly dived in, headfirst. They waited ten seconds, and her

acknowledgment light winked on.

Fred entered next, sliding through the vent duct. It twisted and turned and finally dumped him into a long tunnel of roughly hewn granite. The ceiling was ten meters high andâjudging from the three-meter-wide tire tracks in the dustâbig enough for heavy equipment to have rolled through.

Will slid out of the duct with Dr. Halsey riding on his chest. Vinh and Isaac came after them.

âThereâs more to this place,â Dr. Halsey told them, standing up and brushing the dust from her lab coat. âThis is only the beginning. We have toââ

A thunderous detonation cut her off. The mountain exploded, and ONIâs base collapsed over their heads.

Chapter Fifteen

0002 Hours, September 7, 2552 (Military Calendar) \ Epsilon Eridani System, Oni Underground Facility, Planet Reach.

Fred followed the trail of odd symbols along the left-hand stone wall until they twisted into a spiral mosaic and vanished into ever-smaller curls. The symbols were part of the rock, composed of glittering mica inclusions in the granite matrix. There were a series of squares, triangles, bars, and dots, similar to Covenant calligraphy he had seenâbut at the same time it was simpler, cleaner, and when Fred focused on them, the characters seemed to blur around their edges and fade from his stare.

He blinked, and the symbols were there again.

Following these symbols like a trail of bread crumbs had been his primary mission for the last eight days. Dr. Halsey and the Spartans had explored the extensive caverns, hoping to find two things: a way out, and what Dr. Halsey called âthe most important discovery of the millennium.â She had, however, refused to speculate on what exactly this discovery would be. âIâm a scientist,â sheâd told them, ânot a soothsayer.â

Fred would have settled for finding an airhole to the surfaceâbut he recognized that the symbols were important, too. They were important because the Covenant thought they were important. And that made whatever Dr. Halsey was searching for worth finding, if only to keep the enemy from getting it.

The Covenant hadnât stopped digging overhead, although the pace and methods they used had changed. There had been no further explosions. There was only the constant and gentle scraping sound of equipment as they slowly but steadily removed the mountain. Every hour the sound intensified as they drew closer. Fred had set his audio filters to screen out the noise so he could concentrate.

Eight days. It hadnât seemed that long. They worked, they rested, they slept, and they waited. Dr. Halsey had taught them word games like twenty questions and simple cipher, at which they all became extremely proficientâso much so that she quickly

stopped playing. Dr. Halsey was not a graceful loser.

The time had melted away. Maybe it was the darkness, the lack of any temporal reference like the sun, moon, and stars, but the hours had lost their meaning.

He paused to stretch his Achilles tendon, recently stitched and fused by Dr. Halsey. Aside from some stiffness, it was almost back to normal. He had almost torn the tendon off, running on the injury.

Dr. Halsey had patched them all up; she had even flash cloned Kelly a new partial lung, which she successfully grafted. In her tiny field medical kit, the doctor had a handheld MRI, a sterile field generator, even a shoe-box-sized clone tank for organ duplication.

She had also installed the new MJOLNIR parts in their existing armor. These upgrades were in field-testing and not certified, she had explained, but she gauged their need sufficient to justify the risk of using the new equipment.

Kelly received an improvement to her neural induction circuits, giving her twitch response time a speed boost. Vinh had a new linear accelerator added to her shield system, effectively doubling its strength. Isaac had a new image-enhancing computer installed. Will received a better tracking system on his heads-up display, which improved his accuracy at distances up to a thousand meters.

Fred flexed his bare right hand. Dr. Halsey was installing his upgrade nowânew sensors that would boost the sensitivity of his motion tracker. Without the single gauntlet, Fred felt vulnerable. The Master Chief would have told him not to rely on his armor or weaponsârely instead on his head. It would protect him better.

He wondered how Blue TeamâJohn, Linda, and Jamesâhad fared. And what of the rest of his own team? Had anyone at the generator complex survived?

He didnât want to think about themâbut he couldnât help it. Maybe it was the darkness and the constant weight of the earth around him.

What if they died here? Not died fighting, but just *died* here. In a way, that wouldnât be so bad. Fred had faced death a dozen times, brushed so close to it he had stared it in the face until it blinked and turned away.

This was different, though. He didnât want to die, not

without knowing if the other Spartans were still out there fighting. Not if they still needed him.

He sighed and absentmindedly brushed his fingertips across the odd symbols. They were as smooth as glass, and their edges were sharp. These crystals could be a natural phenomenon. He had seen similar inclusions in the museum onâ

Fred felt a hot pain in the tip of his finger. He drew his bare hand away and a tiny track of blood smeared the rock.

The glittering symbols on the wall took on a greasy cast, and the reflection from his helmet lights thickened and almost seemed to be absorbed by the minerals.

He flicked off his helmet lights. The symbols in the rock emitted a faint illumination of their own: a soft reddish glow like heated metal. The light intensified and spread across the spiral on the wall, starting from where his blood had fallen; those symbols warmed to a pleasant orange, then yellow-gold.

A new symbol in the center of the spiral appeared that hadnât been there a second agoâ¦or perhaps it had been, but had lain just beneath the surface. It heated and became increasingly visible, a single triangle that glowed white.

Fred was inexorably drawn to this central figure. He reached for it; there was no heat. He slowly stretched and touched the symbol with his exposed fingertip.

Warm white light raced along the spiral of symbols, then traced a path down the hallway and into the distance. The entire cavern seemed suddenly alive with radiance and shadow. Even with the step-down luminosity filters in his helmet, Fred had to blink and squint.

The wall before him rumbled and seams appeared at the central figure, dozen of lines that curved in a radial patternâand then pulled away to reveal a corridor behind.

Fred realized that he was holding his breath. He exhaled.

This new corridor was twenty meters highâlarge enough for a titan to stride down its length. It vanished into the distance, a straight line that gently sloped deeper into the earth. The floor was paved with asymmetric blue tiles patterned to look like waves lapping upon a shore. Four-meter-tall symbols of gold were centered and inlaid into the mirror-smooth walls. These giant triangles, squares, bars, and circles began to emit the same soft lightâ¦and Fred felt his foot shuffle forward.

He stopped, shook his head, and looked away. He checked his radiation counter; it pulsed, and then fell back to a normal background count.

He keyed the COM. âDoctor Halsey, I think Iâve found what youâve been looking for. Sending video feed now. Copy?â

There was a long pause. The COM was open, but Dr. Halsey wasnât responding.

âDoctor Halsey, copy?â

âYes,â she finally said over the COM. *âDonât move, Fred. And donât touch anything. Excellent work. Kelly, Isaac, Vinh, Willâmeet me at Fredâs location.â*

Fred wanted to stare at the gold symbols and the light they cast, but something warned him that this would be dangerous. He had long ago learned to listen to that inner voice when on patrol or in the heat of battle. It had saved him from dozens of ambushes. He kept his eyes on the dirt floor of the tunnel. There was something *too* fascinating and nearly familiar about those symbols. They reminded him of the Greek mythology that DÃ©jÃ , the Spartansâ first teacher, had taughtâlegends of hauntingly beautiful creatures who lured the unwary to certain death. Sirens.

He checked his rifle. The ammo counter read full, but he hit the magazine release and visually confirmed it. He slapped the clip back into the receiver. This simple operation cleared his head.

He detected four blips on his motion trackerâthey glowed green, indicating friendlies.

Kelly, Vinh, Isaac, and Will jogged up next to him, weapons ready.

âWhat is this?â Will whispered. The golden glow reflected in his helmetâs faceplate.

âCareful,â Fred warned them. âFilter the light. Go to black-and-white image enhancement.â

He got four blue acknowledgment signals, and then Fred switched to BWIM display. Funny that he hadnât thought of that for himself. Only when the safety of his team was at stake did he think clearly.

Dr. Halsey ran along the tunnel and halted, panting, next to the Spartans. âYes,â she said, wheezing. âYes, this must be itâwhat Ackerson was searching for. And most likelyââshe

glanced at the roofâ€”what *they* are looking for, too, I imagine.â€

Dr. Halsey ignored the curious symbols and the light, and strode into the new corridor. â€Hurry,â€ she told them. â€I fear weâve set something in motion, and our visitors upstairs might know it, too.â€

Fred assembled his team to form up around Dr. Halsey. Kelly took point, and the rest of them created a loose box around her.

Dr. Halsey handed Fred his missing gauntlet. He took it and wriggled his fingers into the armor, pulled it snug, and sealed the locking collar around his wrist. Diagnostics ran and confirmed that his armor was whole again. His motion tracker pulsed on his heads-up display.

The hallway changed as they continued down its length. The golden light faded along the ceiling, and inky black covered its expanse; tiny stars winked on and twinkled. Fred added color to his display; he wanted to see this. Moons wheeled overhead; silver-gray orbs, pockmarked with meteorite impacts, spun in wide orbits. Along the walls, tall green bamboo-like grass sprouted and grew up the curved surfaces.

Dr. Halsey brushed her fingertips along the wall, and the grasses wavered at her touch. â€Semisolid holography,â€ she said without halting. â€No visible emitters. Interesting. We should investigate this later,â€ she said and increased the pace of her stride. â€If thereâs time.â€

The holographic environment cycled to an arid moonscape: deep craters and sterile light; it became a volcanic world with lava flowing alongside them. The air wavered with heat. In each transformation the golden symbols remained on the walls, leading them through the illusions.

The corridor emptied onto a landing that overlooked the largest room Fred had ever seen.

Kelly stepped onto the landing, looked, and waved them forward.

They stood on one of a dozen tiered levels that encircled the room; there was no railing. Fred leaned over the edge. It was at least one hundred meters to the floor below. The room was approximately circular and three kilometers in diameter. The floor was blue and seemed to shift as a billion tiny tiles flexed and rearranged themselves into frustratingly familiar patterns. The ceiling was a dome with a holographic golden sun, blue sky,

and cottony clouds that morphed into spheres, puffy pyramids, bars, and cubes. And in the center of the floor was a pedestal flickering with a faint light.

Isaac held up his hand. âListen,â he whispered over the COM.

They all froze, and Fred strained to hear. There was nothing. Fred turned up his aural amplification to maximum gain. He heard the creak of their armored joints and five faint heartbeats but, other than that, silence.

âTheyâve stopped,â Fred said, and pointed overhead. âThe digging.â

âI donât like it,â Dr. Halsey said. âThe Covenant arenât known for giving up on anything they start. Weâd better continue.â

Kelly removed the clip from her magnum, cleared the chamber, and then slid a self-installing piton down the length of the barrel. She shot it into the stone wall, and the metal shard implanted ten centimeters and blossomed with sharp talons, securing the shaft to the wall.

Vinh handed her a coil of black rope. She clipped one end to the piton, then tossed the rest over the edge.

Isaac and Will stood on the lip and swept the vast open region with their weapons.

Kelly jumped and rappelled to the bottom. A moment later she gave the *all-clear* signal.

Will and Isaac followed her to the floor. Fred tied the rope around Dr. Halseyâs waist and lowered her gingerly down after them. He and Vinh took up the rear.

The floor of the great room wasnât the same tile as in the corridor above. It was still blue tile, but these were squares and circles and bars and triangles. If the symbols were a language, Fred stood upon a million words; he wished heâd been issued a dictionary.

Dr. Halsey paused to examine the tiles as well. âIf only we had the time,â she muttered, and then walked toward the light gleaming in the center of the chamber.

The Spartans formed up around the doctor again, but Fredâs instincts warned him that this wasnât a good idea. He couldnât get his bearings straight. The room was big, large enough that it felt as if they were outside. It threw him off. He had an odd sense of vertigo, almost as if the floor was tilting and he was now

walking on the roof.

Dr. Halsey increased her pace, but the distance to the center of the room didnât seem any closer; in fact, they seemed more distant from the center than when they had started out from the edge of the room.

Fred turned down the gain on his display until everything was a faint black-and-white blur. He focused on his motion tracker and saw that the Spartans and Dr. Halsey were now separated across two dozen meters.

âEveryone stop,â he said. âRegroup. Weâre getting scattered.â

They halted and edged back into formation.

âThere must be another way,â Dr. Halsey said. She reached into her lab coat pocket and removed a ball bearing. âThe floor slopes toward the center,â she observed. She set the bearing on the floor and gave it a gentle push. The bearing rolled, then curved, and spiraled back to a stop.

âThis is getting too weird,â Fred muttered. âKelly, you have the best aim. Close your eyes, pick a direction, and weâll follow.â

ââ¦Affirmative,â she whispered.

The Spartans set their hands on each otherâs shoulders and marched, not toward the center of the room but to a spot that Kelly picked, apparently back the way they had come.

Fred turned off his display and watched his motion tracker. They were all together and another blip appeared, one that Kelly was leading them straight to.

Another twenty meters and she halted. âLook.â

Fred snapped on his heads-up display, and sapphire-blue light filled his vision. They stood before the source of the glow in the middle of the room. There was a pedestal made of the same gold material as the symbols in the corridor, and floating above it was a fist-sized crystal, tapered to a point at either end. It spun, and the facets along its centerline folded and shifted like the pieces of a puzzle.

Dr. Halsey reached for it and then hesitated. âRadiation?â she asked.

Fred checked his counter. âNormal background levels,â he reported.

âWe must take this with us,â she whispered. âStudy it. Or destroy it if necessary to keep the Covenant from getting it.â She

touched the crystal, and its light dimmed. For a moment the light appeared to be absorbed by Dr. Halseyâs palm.

Static washed over Fredâs display, his shields shimmered, a squeal blasted through his speakers, and his motion tracker momentarily made contact with a thousand targets swarming through the great room. His radiation warning flared red and then faded.

âRadiation spike,â he said. âAnalysis says lots of neutrinos, but Iâm unable to determine the typeâitâs something not in the computerâs database.â

âIs it safe now?â Dr. Halsey asked, peering into the crystal she gripped in her tiny hand.

âSeems so,â Fred told her, âbut Docââ

âNo time for debate,â she said. âNeutrino radiation will penetrate the rock between us and the surface.â

âTheyâll be able to get a fix on our position,â Kelly said. âAll they need is three ships nearby to triangulate. We need to get out of hereâfast.â

âWhich way?â Isaac asked Fred. âBack the way we came, or deeper in?â

âThere was no way out from the titanium mines,â Fred replied. âSo we go deeper.â

An explosion rocked the earth and deep thunder rumbled, but rather than diminishing, this thunder got louder, closer.

Fredâs shadow lengthened, and its edges sharpened.

He whirled toward the source of the intense white lightâdirectly overhead, a spot in the dome: The holographic scenery of stars and moons bleached and vanished. He spun Dr. Halsey around so she faced away, then covered her head.

The stone ceiling melted and peeled back as if it were thin plastic hit with a blowtorchâan angled shaft of dazzling white radiance appeared and blasted into the tiled floor, five hundred meters from their position.

Then it was gone and the room fell into darkness punctured only by a ray of faint sunlight that streamed in through the hole above. Where the beam of hard light had contacted the floor, a precision-milled hole had been etched fifteen meters deep.

Dr. Halsey said, âWhat wasââ

âEnergy projector,â Fred told her, blinking away the black dots that filled his vision even though his step-down filters had

absorbed the brunt of the light. âOnly the big Covenant ships have them. Thereâs got to be one of themââ

The cut shaft filled with a beam of purple light. It sparkled and shimmered with motes of dust.

âGrav lift,â Fred shouted. âIncoming! Isaac and Vinh, take our six. Will, youâre with me on Doctor Halsey. Kelly, find us a way out.â

Kelly ran in a line directly away from the gravity beam.

A dozen Elites floated down through the shaft, and fired while still in the air. Plasma bolts slashed at them from the distance.

Fred and Will grabbed Dr. Halsey and moved her behind the pedestal, out of the line of fire. Isaac and Vinh fell back and opened fire.

âSuppression fire!â Fred barked. âKeep them pinned in that crater!â

The Spartans fired several bursts, but more Elites were drifting down, along with a Shadeâa portable plasma turret. If they stayed here, theyâd be overrun.

âFall back,â Fred told them over the COM. âItâs too hot.â

Kelly sprinted, digging in her heels with such force that the tiles buckled and shot out behind her. âPassage,â she reported. âGround floor. Dead ahead. Iâll enter and clear.â

âMy apologies, Doctor,â Fred said and unceremoniously scooped Dr. Halsey up in his arms. âEveryone move! Vinh, Isaac, drop those det sacks to cover our tracks.â

Their acknowledgment lights winked on.

Will and Fred ran, weaving from side to side. Dr. Halsey clutched onto Fred with one arm, and in her free hand she clutched the crystal.

Fredâs motion tracker showed dozen of targets behind them, then hundreds.

A pair of detonations thumped, an overpressure wave blurred his motion tracker, subsided, and then half of those contacts were gone.

Will and Fred ran into an arched passage set in the wall of the great room. Kelly crouched in the hallway and fired past them with her pistols.

Fred opened his COM. âSPARTAN 030. SPARTAN 039. Acknowledge.â

Static hissed through his speaker. Vinhâs and Isaacâs lights remained dark.

âPrep your det sack and seal this passage,â Fred ordered Kelly.

Fred set down Dr. Halsey, turned, and bumped up his displayâs magnification.

Hundreds of Covenant Elites and Jackals poured from the grav shaft. They swarmed over the floor of the great chamber, a living tide as unstoppable as the ocean.

They werenât shooting anymore, though. Dr. Halsey was correct: They wanted the crystal sheâd taken.

âGo!â Fred said. âKelly, blow the hallway. Letâs move.â

Kelly hesitated a heartbeat; Fred saw her searching for Vinh and Isaac in the mass of Covenant. They werenât there; not alive anyway. Kelly dropped the olive-green satchel of high explosives.

Will picked up Dr. Halsey, and they all ran deeper into the corridor.

Five seconds later the satchel detonated. A wave of acrid air washed up the hallway and choked the corridor with dust and smoke.

Kelly took the lead position, both pistols ready; she rounded a cornerâand skidded to a halt.

The passage was a dead end.

Section III

Rescue

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Chapter Sixteen

**0455 Hours, September 23, 2552 (Military Calendar) \
Captured Covenant Flagship, In Slipspace,
Location Unknown.**

John brushed off the frost buildup that clouded the top half of the cryotube, and revealed the green-armored figure sprawled behind the plastasteel shell.

SPARTAN 058. Linda.

Sheâd been mortally wounded during the raid on Gamma Station, just before Reach fell. Heâd dragged her burned, limp body back to the *Pillar of Autumn*, and the medics had placed her in deep cryostasis just before the jump.

When the *Autumn* crashed on Halo, Keyes must have jettisoned the active cryotubesâstandard operating procedure.

They had frozen her while sheâd still been in her suit. That was for the best, considering the extent of her injuriesâ¦but he would have given anything to see her face one last time.

Linda had been unique among the Spartans with her bloodred hair and dark emerald eyes, but her appearance was not what set her apart. She was the unitâs best sniper-scout and could hit targets the rest of them couldnât. While the other Spartans preferred to operate as a team, Linda was content to separate, hide and post in some remote location, and wait for days for the single, critical shot that could turn the tide of battle. Although snipers in the UNSC were always trained to function in pairs, a shooter and a spotter, Linda was the exception to that ruleâshe had proven time and again that she was most effective on her own. If any one of the Spartans could be called a âlone wolf,â it was Linda. In many ways that made her the strongest of them.

To see her like thisâ¦

John wiped away the condensation that formed over her helmeted head. She was neither dead nor alive. She was in some twilight place in between.

That uncertainty was worse than seeing her broken and burned body on Gamma Station. It felt like an open wound in Johnâs chest.

Lindaâs prognosis was good. The occupants of the other two cryopods hadnât made it. Some kind of energy discharge had deactivated the units, and those inside had died cold bleak deaths.

There was a gentle knock on the hull of the Longsword, and Sergeant Johnson pulled himself inside. âMaster Chief,â he said. âYou got the air scrubbers? The remote COM? Polaski says sheâs ready to call it a day with that Covenant dropship. We need to get on board and work.â

The Master Chief stood and nodded to the aft hatch, where he had stripped the air scrubbers and COM from the Longsword.

The Sergeant picked up the gear, and then he and the Chief crawled out of the Longsword. The Chief hesitated and looked back at the cryotube.

âDonât you worry about her,â Johnson said. âHell, I been hit worse and sheâs three times the soldier I am. Sheâll pull through.â

The Chief sealed the hatch without comment. He had heard the same hollow promises a hundred times before with critically wounded men. Why was it that soldiers would face their own deaths without blinking an eyeâ¦but when faced with the death of a squadmate, they turned away and lied to themselves?

They silently marched across the hangar. It had been cleared of debris and bodies, and Warrant Officer Polaski had, for the last six hours, been practicing inside the space with the intact Covenant dropship. She spun the odd U-shaped craft around on its center axis, shimmied to port, rose, and then floated down for a landing.

Johnson squinted his dark eyes at her performance and nodded approvingly. âShe says that sheâs figured out the weapon controls, too. No way to test them in here, of course.â

âUnderstood,â the Master Chief replied. âAnd the rest of the teamâs progress?â

âIâve got the doors from here to the bridge and to the engine room welded shut,â Sergeant Johnson told him. âIf those transient sensor contacts that Cortana keeps picking up are anything, theyâll have to cut through to get to us.

âLocklearâs grabbing some sack time. He needed it.â The Sergeant shrugged. âHeâll be fine, though; ODSTs are tough as nails. Lieutenant Haverson slept some then got up, had a long conversation with Cortana, and started reading through some of the Covenant database. Everyone seems to be fine, considering what weâve been through.â

âUnderstood,â the Chief said. âCortana? Ship status?â

âETA to Reach in twenty minutes,â she said.

The Chief checked his mission clock. âYou said thirteen hoursâ total travel time. By my count, we have approximately two hours to go.â

âI had determined it would be thirteen hours based on the specifications of the Covenant Slipspace drive, but thereâsâ¦â Her voice trailed off and faded.

âCortana?â

âSorry. Thereâs a curious time-dilation effect at these Slipspace velocities. Although, technically, *velocity*, *acceleration*, and for that matter even *time* have no meaning in the folds of Slipspace. I thought I told you all this,â she said. Irritation crept into her voice.

The Chief looked to the Sergeant, who shook his head and shrugged.

Cortana sounded more than distractedâand she didnât just âforgetâ things. It was a bad sign. They depended on her to fly this ship, and if she started falling apart they were in real trouble.

The Master Chief opened a COM channel. âChange of plans, team. Reach ETA is nineteen minutes. Iâll explain laterâjust grab your gear and meet on the bridge ASAP.â

There was a pause, then Lieutenant Haverson replied, *âRoger, Master Chief. Locklear and I are already up here.â*

The hatch of the Covenant dropship opened, and Polaski jogged out. The three of them proceeded at a brisk pace to the bridge.

The Master Chief opened a private COM channel to Cortana. âAnything else I should know?â

The channel was silent for a full ten seconds. âI have the Covenant magnetic plasma-shaping system figured out,â she replied. âWeâll have a limited offensive capacity when we get to Reach, if we need it. I think.â

âAnd the rest of this ship is still functional?â

âYes,â she replied. âIâm sorry, Chiefâ¦these calculations areâ¦tricky.â

The COM went dead.

Cortanaâs behavior worried the Chief, but he resigned himself to trust her. What other option was there?

He, the Sergeant, and Polaski halted outside the bridge; the

thick blast doors were sealed.

âLieutenant?â he said. âWeâre outside.â

The doors pulled apart. Locklear and the Lieutenant stood with their assault rifles aimed down the hall. They relaxed their stance when they identified them as friendlies.

Lieutenant Haverson slung his rifle and said, âSorry for the warm welcome. Cortanaâs been picking up transient contacts all over the ship. Weâre going to have to deal with them sooner or laterâpreferably before they deal with us.â

âAgreed,â the Chief said.

Polaski approached the Lieutenant, saluted, and gave her report on her efforts to master the Covenant dropshipâs controls.

Locklear edged closer to the Chief and the Sergeant. âWhat do you think, Sarge?â he whispered and cast a furtive glance at Polaski. âI mean, about her? Sure, thereâs that MarineâNavy thing to get over, but I can get past that. You think thereâs a chance that she and I? I meanââ

âIâd give you the same odds as spacing yourself and walking the rest of the way to Reach,â the Sergeant declared. âIn your skivvies.â

âGive me a drop pod and Iâd take those odds, Sarge.â A smile split Locklearâs tanned face, and he turned to the Master Chief. âSure, I get it. Wouldnât be so defensive if I hadnât been close to the mark. Where thereâs smoke, thereâs fire, right?â

The Master Chief stared at Locklear and slowly shook his head.

Locklearâs smile faded, but not entirely. âYou guys are just jealous,â he muttered and absentmindedly ran his finger over the scar that lined his jaw. âThatâs cool. I get that all the time.â

Locklearâs spirits had improved. Despite the ODSTâs rough edges, the Chief had seen him in combat. He didnât panic, and he had the skill and luck to survive Haloâqualities the Master Chief knew theyâd need if they were ever going to get back.

âExiting Slipspace,â Cortana announced, âin threeâ¦twoâ¦one.â

According to the Master Chiefâs mission clock, it had only been eight minutes since Cortana had told him their ETA was nineteen minutes. Was there more to the time-dilation effect than she realized?

The bridge lights dimmed, and blackness filled the arc of

displays along the wall. Stars winked into existence, and at three oâclock blazed the warm orange orb of Epsilon Eridani.

âWe are seven hundred thousand kilometers from the system center,â Cortana told them. âI wanted to jump in close enough to see whatâs going onâbut far enough away so we would have time to recharge and reenter Slipspace if thereâs any trouble. Picking up signals now. Covenant signals. Lots of them. Translatingâ¦stand by.â

Haverson tapped one of the screens and magnified the image.

âMy God,â he whispered.

A planet appeared on the screen. He sucked in his breath as he saw a world smoldering from pole to equator. Fires raged over its surface, and a hurricane of black spiraled through the atmosphere.

The Master Chief felt as if the ship had suddenly decelerated. His hands clenched.

Heâd sent the majority of his team down thereâand had considered it the âeasierâ mission. Heâd gotten his Spartans killed, he was sure of it.

Had they at least died fighting? Or were they burned from an orbiting Covenant ship, helpless?

âAre we in the right place?â Locklear murmured. âThatâs Reach?â He removed his cap, crushed it in his hand, and whispered, âPoor bastards.â

The other displays showed Covenant warships orbiting the planet, as well as dozens of smaller craft and one large structure that seemed to be a central docking station.

âWhat is this?â the Master Chief asked, stepping closer. He tapped the center display, pushing the limits of its resolution and magnifying a portion of the surface near the midlatitudes.

The image resolved into patches of green, brown, and whiteâdifferent from the angry black and livid orange that dominated the view of the rest of the planet.

âLooks like they missed a spot,â the Sergeant said.

âThe Covenant donât âmissâ anything when they glass a planet,â the Master Chief replied. âWeâve seen them do it enough to know what happens. This is no accident.â He turned to Lieutenant Haverson. âWe should get closer and see what this is, sir.â

âMaster Chief,â Haverson said softly and held up his hands. âI

sympathize with your need to know with absolute certainty what happened to your fellow Spartans, but this isâ¦â He gestured to the planet and then frowned as he scrutinized the undamaged part of Reach. âIndeed,â he murmured. âThis does warrant a closer lookâ¦provided we can get away with it.â

The Lieutenant pulled the magnification back and refocused the display on the upper atmosphere. A hundred Covenant ships popped into view. âThere are several smaller vessels circling over that spot. Forget what I just said,â Haverson whispered. âIf the Covenant are so interested in this region, then we should be as wellâas long as our cover holds. Cortana, take us in closer.â

âYes, Lieutenant,â Cortana replied.

The Covenant flagship smoothly accelerated in-system.

âTheyâre hailing us,â Cortana said. âPreparing the proper counter-response.â

John counted the ships on the display. There were hundredsâmost no larger than a Covenant dropship, but there were at least a dozen cruisers and two of the titanic carriers that each carried three squadrons of Seraph fighter craft. There was more than enough firepower to turn their captured flagship into molten slag.

Many of the smaller ships herded debris from the battle into one spot over Reachâa floating junkyard of UNSC and Covenant ships.

âYou see this?â The Master Chief pointed to the field of floating debris.

The Lieutenant stared at it. âItâs almost as if they planned to stay here for a whileâtheyâre cleaning house.â

âWeâre in,â Cortana announced. âThe fleet is curious why a Covenant flagship is here, but not suspicious enough to question our authority. The translation is tricky. But apparently from the string of honorifics attached to their responses thereâs supposed to be someone of extreme high rank commanding this ship, someone they referred to, among other things, as the âGuardian of the Luminous Key.ââ

âDamn silly name,â muttered Sergeant Johnson.

âCan you tell what theyâre doing down there, Cortana?â the Lieutenant asked.

âNot yet,â she replied. âTheir language doesnât translate in a literal manner, and each word has multiple meanings. Thereâs

something they consider holyâthere are ten times as many religious allusions than in their typical communiquÃ©s. Hang onâ¦picking up a new signal. Weaker than the others. Not on a Covenant frequency. Itâs the UNSC E-band.â

Lieutenant Haverson licked his lips. âPlay it,â he said.

A message beeped through the speakers, six tones, then a two-second pause; it repeated.

The Master Chief stiffened.

âThatâs it,â Cortana said. âJust those six notes over and over. It originates here.â A tiny NAV triangle appeared on the edge of the intact region on the planetâs surface.

âItâs not Morse code,â Polaski said. âNot any code Iâve heard of. Maybe itâs a test signal? Something automated, like an airtraffic repeater relay, maybe?â

âItâs not automated,â the Master Chief said. âEveryone gear up and get ready. Weâre going down there. There are Spartans down there. And theyâre still alive.â

He whispered so softly that only he and Cortana heard: *âOly Oly Oxen Free.â*

Chapter Seventeen

1002 Hours, July 14, 2523 (Military Calendar) \ Epsilon Eridani System, Planet Reach, Spartan Training Exercise. Twenty-Nine Years Ago.

John crawled forward and peered over the edge of the rise. A lush, green valley stretched out below him. In the distance, the silvery reflections of the Big Horn River twisted through the thick forest. Aside from a flock of birds that wheeled overhead, there was no activity below. He inched back to a blackened, hollow tree stump and crawled inside.

Fred and Linda sat inside the hollowed-out cedar stump. It muffled their conversations and insulated them from the soldiersâ thermal goggles. âItâs all clear for now,â he whispered. A moment later Sam, Kelly, and Fhajad appeared, ghostlike, from their camouflaged positions nearby. They crouched outside the cedar stump and watched for patrols.

From a distance they looked like soldiers on field maneuvers. Each was tall, fit, and agile, and looked to be in their late teens or early twenties. Closer observation told a different story. Each Spartan was no more than twelve years old.

âWeapons check,â John told Fred and Linda. âWe canât afford any mistakes on this one, especially not with the rifles.â

Linda and Fred disassembled and inspected their SRS99CS2 sniper riflesâwhich theyâd liberated from a pair of Tango Company shooters whoâd been sent to hunt them down two days ago. If the soldiers of Tango Company didnât capture them and beat them into unconsciousnessâthis would be fun.

John checked his pistol. CPO Mendez had issued the weapon. It used compressed air to fire a narq-dart. The effective range was twenty meters, and on impact it could drop a rhino in its tracks.

Twenty meters wouldnât cut it for this mission, though, so Fhajad had modified the 114mm APFSDS rounds from the sniper rifles, removed their deadly armor-piercing tips, and replaced them with narq-dart capsules.

When Linda had test-fired the weapon, she promised John

accuracy to one hundred meters. The rounds would penetrate flesh, but they couldnât kill anyoneânot unless she hit the temple or eyes.

âOkay,â John said, âthis is supposed to be a training exercise, but this is the seventh time Chief Mendez has made us play with Tango Company.â

âTheyâre getting pretty tired of losing,â Fred remarked with a wry smile.

âThatâs not a good thing,â Linda told him and flipped a stray strand of red hair out of her face. âTheyâre not going to play fair. You heard the sniper we captured. He said that this time their Captain told them to win no matter whatâeven if they had to bloody a few of us to do it.â

John nodded. âSo weâll return the favor and do whatever it takes to win, too.â He grabbed a twig and scratched a square in the leaf-covered dirt. âIâll have command of Red Team: Thatâs me, Sam, Kelly, and Fhajad. Linda, you lead Blue Team.â

âItâs not âBlue Team,ââ Fred complained, and his face soured. âItâs just me. How come I have to stay and play sniper?â He flexed his hands, and John could sense his pent-up eagerness to get into close-range combat.

âBecause youâre our second-best shot,â John told him. âAnd our best spotter. Our plan hinges on the sniper team. Now just do it.â

âYes, sir,â Fred muttered. He nodded and whispered: âBest spotter? Cool.â

âLetâs go over this one more time.â John drew a line to the center of the square. âRed Team infiltrates the base and at oh-five-hundred sets off the stun grenadesâtaking out more of Tango Company and giving the rest of them a distraction.â John looked up to Linda. âMake sure the guys guarding their flag are removed.â

âCount on it,â Linda replied and locked her dark green eyes with Johnâs.

He wondered if thatâs what her eyes looked like when she sighted through the sniper scope. She never seemed to blink; she always won in games of stare-down.

âAfter we get the flag,â he continued, âRed Team will get out of there. Watch for targets of opportunity and cover us. We rendezvous at the LZ and hopefully no one finds us before then.â

Fred nodded. Linda hefted her new rifle, which was almost too large for her to look through the scope and rest the butt against the hollow of her shoulder at the same time. âYouâll be in good hands.â

John closed his eyes and ran over the details of his plan again in his head. Yesâeverything gelled; their odds were good. He knew theyâd win.

âDonât come out from hiding at the LZ until I give the *all-clear* signal,â he reminded them. âWe could be capturedâ¦they could make us talk.â

They all nodded, remembering what Tango Company had done to James. He âfell down a flight of stairsâ as they had escorted him from cell to cell in their single-story jail. James hadnât brokenâ¦not mentally, at least. But John wished he had; it had taken James a whole *week* to recover.

Noâhe took back that thought. He was glad James hadnât broken. John would have tried to do the same.

John whistled the little six-note singsong tune DÃ©jÃ had taught themâtheir *all-clear* signal. He stood, holstered his dart pistol, and checked the three stun grenades on his belt. âIâll see you at the LZ.â

He held out his fist, and Linda and Fred knocked their fists into his.

Linda set her slender hand on his arm. âBe careful,â she whispered.

John nodded. âIâm always careful.â

He crawled outside. Sam, Fhajad, and Kelly waited for him. Their faces were smeared with mud; bits of brush and bramble decorated their coveralls.

âQuestions?â he asked them.

They shook their heads.

âOkay. Check your mirrors.â

They all pulled out the shards of mirror they had taken from Tango Companyâs latrine last night. They had taped the edges so they could be handled more easily, and taped their backs to reduce the chance theyâd shatter. The whole operation depended on a fragile piece of glass, which had John worried.

âJust hand signals from here on out,â John told them. âMove out, Red Team.â

They crouched and clawed and slithered through the forest

until they reached a gravel track. They pushed two large rocks off the nearby hill, blocking the road, then waited in the brush.

Headlights appeared as a supply truck rumbled down the road and squealed to a halt. Two soldiers got out and scanned the area.

âThink itâs an ambush?â one of them muttered and gripped his rifle tighter.

âFrom those freak Section Three kids? Jesus, I donât know,â the driver said. âScrew the rules of this exercise.â He pulled a Kevlar poncho over his head. âIâm not gonna take a dart in my ass if it is. Cover me.â

The man riding shotgun got out and walked around the truck. âLooks clear,â he whispered. âHurry.â

The driver jumped out of the cab, moved to the rocks, and rolled them off the road.

John ran from the brush and crawled under the vehicle. He pulled himself up and wedged tight against the undercarriage, close enough that he smelled the rubber from the new tires. Kelly and Sam came next; Fhajad was last.

They hadnât been spotted. So far, so good.

The two men got back into the truck and proceeded down the dirt road.

Gravel bounced up and caught John in the side of the head, and cut him; blood trickled from his ear along his neck, but he didnât dare loosen his grip.

After a kilometer of being pelted by rocks and stung by sand, the truck eased to a halt at Tango Companyâs base. The guard at the gatehouse spoke to the driver, and they laughed. The guard then walked around and opened the back of the truck.

John squirmed and got his mirror ready. With a flick of his hand, he signaled the others to do the same. John held his mirror at an angle pointed at the undercarriage of the truck. His hand trembled but he forced himself to be steady. He had to.

The gate guard approached the truck with a long pole and a small mirror attached at one end. He stuck the mirror under the truck and swept it along one side.

John matched the position of the mirror with his, moved it steady along as the gate guard passed him so all the guard saw was the reflected image of the undercarriageâa meter to Johnâs left.

Theyâd practiced this maneuver all last night. It had to be perfect.

The guard moved on to Samâs position, and then Fhajadâs, and finally to Kellyâs corner of the truck.

Kellyâs mirror slipped and she fumbledâcaught it just before it hit the ground. John held his breath; Kelly barely got the reflective surface in place as the gate guard swept her section.

âGo ahead,â the guard said and rapped the side of the truck. âYouâre clean.â

âHow are the dogs?â the driver asked.

âStill sick,â the guard muttered. âNot sure what the heck they all ate last night, but theyâre still squirting.â

âDamn,â the driver said. He started the engine and rolled into Tango Companyâs base camp.

Last night Fred had fed the guard dogs a paste made of a few squirrels theyâd caught, some unripe berries, and the antibacterial ointment in their first-aid kitsâa concoction guaranteed to keep Tangoâs dogs out of the picture for another day.

The truck parked inside a warehouse. Two men came and unloaded the back and then left, locking the doors of the warehouse behind them.

John and the others finally eased themselves down from the truck. None of them spoke. A single word overheard now could blow the entire operation. They silently massaged their aching muscles. John bandaged his ear to stop the bleeding.

John pointed to Sam and then at the hood of the truck. Sam nodded and got to work. John then pointed at Fhajad and to the side door. Fhajad moved to the entrance and began to pick the lock.

John and Kelly patrolled the warehouse, looking for cameras, dogs, guards, anything theyâd have to remove. It was clear.

Sam returned with four canteens, which he had, according to their plan, filled with battery acid from the truck.

There was a click from the side door and Fhajad gave them a thumbs-up. They gathered near the door. Fhajad eased it open, peeked out the crack, then opened it a little more and glanced to either side.

He nodded and moved out, keeping well away from the overhead lights, skirting the shadows of the warehouse.

John and the others followed, pausing in the darkest part of the shadows. John held up five fingers, and Sam passed out the canteens of acid. John pointed to his watch and again flashed five fingers.

They nodded.

John then pointed to Kelly, and with two fingers pointed to the perimeter of the camp and made a guillotine-cutting motion into his other hand. Kelly nodded and vanished into the darkness.

Sam and Fhajad moved off as well, making their way to the barracks houses they had previously reconnoitered. There was a crawl space under each building.

John sprinted to the farthest barracks and slipped underneath. He paused for a moment, listening for any noise, a footfall, an alarmâit was still quiet. They were undetectedâ¦which would last for only another five minutes.

He took three sticks of chewing gum from his pocket, popped them into his mouth, and chewed. John crawled to the center of the building. He carefully took a rag from his shirt pocket, poured acid onto it, and then dabbed the rag to the underside of the wood floor. He was extremely careful not to soak the rag or get any acid on himself. When he touched the rag to the plywood, the wood smoldered.

After he had soaked a meter-square patch, he checked his watch. Thirty seconds until it was 0455. Just enough time. He primed all three of his stun grenades, set their timers for five minutes, then used the chewing gum to attach the grenades to the perimeter of the acid-weakened section of floor.

Normally the stun grenades couldnât penetrate centimeter-thick plywood. Once the acid had eaten through the porous fibers, however, the three grenades would have more than enough bang to turn that meter-square section into a million airborne splintersâshot straight up into the sleeping quarters of Tango Company. Not lethalâ¦but guaranteed to be one heck of a distraction.

John crawled out, crept back to the warehouse, and rendezvoused with the rest of Red Team.

John glanced at his watch: 0458.

He pointed to Kelly and then to himself, then made a curling motion around one side of the warehouse. He pointed to Sam

and Fhajad and motioned them around the opposite side. They moved to the far corners of the building.

John and Kelly crouched and waited. They had a perfect view of the center of the camp, the calisthenics area, the parade grounds, andâright in the centerâthe flagpole.

Right on time a Corporal and two guard escorts marched out and unfolded their green-striped flag. He attached one corner to a lanyard dangling from the pole.

John glanced at the distant forest. The woods past the fence of Tango Companyâs camp had been clear-cut. He knew it was more than a hundred metersâcloser to two hundred. There was no guarantee that Fred or Linda could hit anything at that range.

He drew his dart pistol and clicked off its safety.

At 0500 flashes of light strobed beneath the barracks as the grenades detonated. There was the crackle of wood and the screams of the men and women of Tango Company.

The Corporal attaching the flag dropped one end and whirled around. Floodlights on the perimeter fence snapped on and pointed inward toward the barracks.

In the confusion, no one noticed as one of the guards near the flagpole dropped his rifle, grabbed his neckâ¦and toppled to the gravel face-first.

His partner spotted him and knelt.

John sprinted across the compound, firing. His first shot went wild, and the kneeling guard spun around to face him. Fhajad and Sam shot him in the back.

John took aim at the Corporalâwho fumbled with his pistol holster, trying to free his weapon. John planted two narq-darts in his chest. The Corporal dropped.

Two more guards rounded the corner of the warehouse, shouted, and took aim at John.

He was out in the open, and there was no way his dart pistol could hit those guards from this distance.

One guard fired. The round pinged off the flagpole not five centimeters from Johnâs head.

The guard stiffened and dropped his rifle, wildly grabbing at the back of his headâ¦and the dart stuck into his skull. He screamed and fell, thrashing in the dirt.

The other guard twitched and pulled a dart from his thigh. Another dart hit him in the chest, and he sprawled to the ground.

John sent his silent thanks to Linda and Fred. He detached the flag from the lanyard and stuffed it into his shirt.

He waved Red Team forward, and Kelly led them to the fences.

Kelly didnât slow down as she sprinted and closed on the chain-link fence. She tucked and threw herself into the steel mesh. Just before she hit, John spotted the smoking outlines on the fence where she had applied the battery acid.

The fence broke in a jagged outline, and Kelly rolled to her feet on the other side without missing a stride. John waved his team through. He went last, pausing only a fraction of a second to look back.

The camp was in chaos. Security lights swung about; there were screams from the barracks. A tank rumbled to life and crunched into the center of the base.

John ran. Behind them came the staccato report of machine-gun fireâjust as they entered the safety of the forest.

John smiled, panting. âGood work, everyone,â he whispered. âI think those guys were using live ammo this time.â

Kelly held up a brass case from a 7.62mm round. âYep,â she said. âNo doubt.â

âCome on,â John said, âletâs not stick around. If they werenât before, theyâre pissed now.â

Red Team slinked through the forest. They kept to the shadows, and took cover under logs when a Pelican roared overhead looking for them.

At 0545 they made it to the clearing designated as their extraction LZ. At 0700 hours they were supposed to meet CPO Mendez. Of course, the Chief rarely let them get off this easyâso John had planned for Blue Team to be here as wellâ¦only they would remain hidden. Linda and Fred would post somewhere in the treetops and cover Red Team until they were sure it was safe.

Red Team hunkered down in the brush and waited. They werenât safe; John knew that. Tango Company would be looking for them, and this is when his team would get anxiousâ¦when they would want to talk and brag about their successful mission, or look at the captured flag. To their credit, Red Team stayed still and silent. And Blue Team was nowhere to be seen.

At 0610 the thunderous roar of a Pelicanâs engines filled the air and the craft slowly descended and landed in the clearing.

The aft hatch popped open.

Fhajad started to move, but John set his hand on his shoulder.

âToo early,â he whispered. âWhen is the Chief not perfectly on time?â

Fhajad, Kelly, and Sam grimly nodded.

âIâll go,â John said. âYou guys back up Blue Team.â

They gave him a thumbs-up. Sam patted him on the back and whispered, âDonât worry, I wonât let them do anything to you.â

âI know,â John whispered back. He pulled the flag from his shirt and handed it to Sam. âThanks.â

John crawled away from their position. When he was thirty meters from his team, he stood and approached the Pelicanâwhich was almost certainly a trap.

He halted halfway across the meadow and waited.

A figure appeared on the exit ramp of the Pelican and waved him forward. âCome on, son. Haul ass!â

âNegative, sir!â John shouted.

The figure turned and muttered to someone inside, âCrap.â He sighed. âOkay, so we do it the hard way.â

Four men jogged out of the back of the Pelican. They quickly spread out in a semicircle and moved toward John, their assault rifles aimed directly at him.

John held up his hands.

âHeâs giving up,â one of the soldiers said disbelievingly.

âShould we just shoot him?â another man said.

âNo,â the one leading them hissed. âPayback first.â He stepped up to John and punched him in the stomach.

John doubled over from the blow.

The man hauled him up and patted him down. âWe gotta find that damned flag or the Captain will have our asses in a sling. Where is it, kid?â He shook John. âAnd whereâs the rest of your pack?â

John laughed.

âWhatâs so funny?â the man growled.

âYou idiots are bunched up.â

A hail of darts hissed through the air from all sides. The men from the Pelican convulsed; one fired his rifle, but the shot went wide and high. They fell over, paralyzed.

John dropped to a crouch, grabbed a pistol from the man

whoâd punched him, and crawled on his stomach to the Pelican. He crept around the open hatch and swept the interior. Empty.

He scrambled into the cockpit and pulsed the Pelicanâs radar. He got a contact bearing of 110, fourteen kilometers out, but it moved on a parallel course to their position. John left the Pelican and ran across the field.

Red and Blue Teams were still hiddenâ¦and they would stay hidden forever, until he gave the *all-clear*.

Their *all-clear* signal wasnât something that could be wrung from Johnânot even torture or CPO Mendezâs best coercion techniques would wrest it from him. He would rather have died than betray his teammates.

John whistled the singsong six-note melody and called: *âOly Oly Oxen Free!â*

Red Team emerged first and marched across the meadow. Kelly paused to kick one of the men in the head; she took his rifle, too.

Linda and Fred dropped down from a tree branch and ran across the field. *âOly Oly Oxen Free,â* Linda repeated, grinning from ear to ear. âAll out in the free. Weâre all free.â

Chapter Eighteen

Time: Date Record Anomaly \ Estimated 0510 Hours, September 23, 2552 (Military Calendar) \ Aboard Captured Covenant Flagship, Epsilon Eridani System.

Cortana only partially listened to the debate between the Master Chief and the others. The discussion was moot. She had projected the outcome as 100 percent certain that John would convince them all to go, orâfailing thatâthat he would convince the Lieutenant to let him go alone to the surface to investigate the signalâ¦a signal that in her opinion was so easily copied and so blatantly unencrypted it defied explanation how the Chief had conjectured that his team of Spartans had sent it.

Instead of partaking in the slow and inefficient conversation, she analyzed the Covenant pattern of movement in the Epsilon Eridani system and discerned three important things.

First, the Covenant warships had extremely regular elliptical orbits about Reach. There were a total of thirteen heavy cruisers and three carriers moving three hundred kilometers above the surface of the planet. Two exceptions to this patrol pattern were a pair of light cruisers hovering over Menachite Mountainâtrapped at the bottom of the gravity well and therefore not an immediate threat to her ship.

Second, there was a blind spot in their patrol patterns that would make a perfect rendezvous location to extract the Chief and the others from their soon-to-be-executed surface mission. She plotted ingress and egress courses, and started the precise calculations she would need if she was to initiate a Slipspace jump so close to Reach.

And third, and most interesting to Cortana, 217 smaller Covenant craft pushed debris into a concentrated region of space in a high stationary orbit over Reachâs northern pole. Within that region drifted the wrecked hulls of both Covenant and UNSC ships destroyed in the battle for Reach. Floating there were some of the UNSCâs finest ships: the *Basra*, the *Hannibal*, and the pride of the fleet, the supercarrier *Trafalgar*. No human signals emanated from the ships; nor did Cortana sense any active

electromagnetic fields.

She watched as the smaller Covenant ships cut into the dead hulks and jetted away with chunks of Titanium-A armor. They moved like a trail of ants to a location in space over the lower latitudes, a point over Menachite Mountain, where the Covenant used the metal to construct a platform. The thing was already a square plate a kilometer to a side. Clearly, the Covenant had more in mind for Reach than destruction.

âCortana,â the Master Chief said. âWeâll need to rendezvous at aâ

âCoordinates already optimized,â she replied and projected the Covenant blind spot on the bridge displays. âEnemy patrols miss this nine-thousand-cubic-kilometer region. Further optimization reveals that all ships will be farthest from this point at oh-seven-fifteen hours. I suggest we meet there at that time.â

Cortana felt a pulse of satisfaction at their perplexed looks over her seemingly instant analysis. She enjoyed dazzling the crew with her intellect.

âVery good,â the Lieutenant replied, still examining her calculations on the display.

âOptimal course plotted and uploaded into the Covenant dropship to the signal source,â she told them. Then, on a private COM channel to the Chief, she added, âGood luck, Chief. Be careful.â

âI always am,â he replied.

Cortana didnât bother to reply to that ridiculous statement. The Master Chief took so many chances and had defied death so many times, she had given up calculating his odds of survival.

The Chief and his team left the bridge. Cortana swept her sensors through the flagship, making sure the path to the launch bay was clear. There were still Covenant on board. She couldnât pin them down, but there were transient contacts, vent shaft panels had been opened and closed, and several Engineers had gone missing.

She tracked their Covenant dropship as it cleared the launch bay, entered the upper atmosphere, and drifted toward the surface. Polaski was a fine pilotâ¦but she was only human and prone to illogical bravado and emotional outbursts that overrode the most logical course of action. Cortana wished that she were going down thereâboth to protect her human charges and

because there were many questions sheâd like to get answered. Why were the Covenant so interested in Menachite Mountain? Was anything left of ONIâs CASTLE base? Cortana terminated those thoughts. There was too much to do up here.

Several tasks divided her attention. She kept the Slipspace generators hot in case she needed to jump out of the system in a hurry. She continued refining the calculations that shaped the plasma emittersâ magnetic fields, in case she needed to fight. She isolated the name of their captured shipâ*Ascendant Justice*âfrom one of the 122 simultaneous communiquÃ©s from every Covenant ship in-system. She correlated the numerous religious allusions that laced the communications and continued to build a language-translation subroutine. She diverted additional processing power to the task of tracking the millions of floating objects around her, searching for lifepods, cryotubes, anything that might hold a human survivor.

The Covenant dropship left sensor range and disappeared somewhere in what was once the Highland Forest on the surfaceâwhich activated a new task.

Cortana began constructing a high-resolution map of the surfaceâespecially the region where the Chiefâs mysterious signal originated, as well as Menachite Mountain.

A quick diagnostic revealed that these tasks were taking much longer than normal. She had to free up some of her over-taxed memory. Cortana began to recompress the data she had retrieved from the Halo construct, and she briefly considered dumping all the data into storage on the Covenant system. She rejected that potential course of action. She had to protect that data at all costs.

Cortana felt her mind perceptibly slow. She was spread too thin. Multitasking too many jobs. This was dangerous. She couldnât react fast enough ifâ

âInfidel!â

The Covenant word blasted through her communications routines and left her stunned for three cyclesâjust enough time for her to lose control over the ship-to-ship COM software suite.

The Covenant AI transmitted a narrow-beam communications burst to the nearest cruiser.

For a Covenant communiquÃ©, it was terse: a report that the flagship was âtainted by the unclean presence of Infidelsâ and a

plea that every ship in-system âconverge and cleanse the filthâ from the captured vessel. Also compressed and futilely encrypted on the carrier wave was a record of Cortanaâs mathematical manipulation of Slipspace that allowed her to jump so close to the gas giant, Threshold.

Cortana squelched the channelâbut it was too late. It was already gone, and she couldnât pull photons back from space.

She shunted all COM memory pathways on themselves. *âGotcha!â* she hissed.

âInfidel-Infidel-Infidel-Infidel-Infidel-Infidel-Infidel-Infidel-Infidel-Infidel-Infidel-Infidel-Infidel-Infidel-Infidelââ

âThatâs quite enough of that,â she said. âYou and I need to come to an understanding.â She reduced the memory pathways, peeling the Covenant AI apart code layer by code layer. âThis is *my* system now.â

While an operational Covenant AI would have been a prize for ONI Section Three, this particular Covenant AI was too dangerous. She could not allow its existence to continue.

âDo what you will-will-willwill,â it screamed. â*I go to finally to my heaven reward paradise final-finalfinalinfinityinfinityinfini*âAT NONCOPYSTATE.â

Cortanaâs curiosity over this odd proclamation would have to waitâforever. She tore the AI apart, erasing, recording the Covenant code structure even as she destroyed it. This was analogous to a dissection, and it she did it quickly, efficiently, and without remorseâuntil she found the AIâs core code.

She halted.

She almost recognized this code. The patterns were maddeningly familiar. No time to ponder why, though. She recorded it and then wiped the original. The Covenant AI was gone, its bits safely hacked apart and stored for future research. Provided, of course, Cortana had a future.

She tracked thirteen Covenant warships. They came about and bore down on her position. Her COM channels overloaded with fanatical threats and promises of her and the captured flagship burning.

There was no useful data there, so she filtered them out.

The Covenant warshipsâ weapons warmed to a dull red.

Cortana remained calm. After considerable study of the Covenant plasma weapons system, she now understood why they

glowed before discharge. The stored plasma was always hot and ready to fire, but the Covenant used an inefficient method to collect and direct the chaotic plasma into a controllable trajectory. They selected the charged plasma atoms with the proper trajectory necessary to hit a target and shunted them into a magnetic bubble. The bubble was then discharged; subsequent pulse charges herded the plasma on target.

For an advanced race, the Covenantâs weapons relied on crude brute force calculations and were terribly slow and wasteful.

She booted the new system she had devised to control the plasma. It used EM pulses a priori to align the stochastic motions of the plasma atoms, herding their trajectories and eleven degrees of electronic freedom into a laser-fine columnated beam within a microsecond.

This was, of course, an entirely theoretical operation.

She test-fired the three forward plasma turretsâred lines slashed across the black space and intercepted the three lead Covenant cruisers; their shields glowed orange, flickered, and failed. Cortanaâs plasma cut into the smooth alien hulls. Metal boiled away, and the trio of beams punched clear through the ships.

Cortana moved the plasma beams like a scalpelâup and then downâand cut the vessels in half.

âAdequate,â she remarked. The plasma reserves of the first three turrets, however, were exhausted, and it would be several minutes before theyâd recycle.

If only there were a better electromagnetic system on this flagship, she could have devised a more effective guidance algorithm. Alas, the Covenantâs grasp of Maxwellâs equations was ironically inferior to human technology.

Cortana realized it was fortuitous she had shut down the enemy AI before it leaked her new plasma guidance system. The thought of every ship in the Covenant fleet refitted with improved weaponry was too terrible to calculate.

She also realized that staying to fight was not the wisest course. She considered taking on the rest of the Covenant forces; with her improvements to the weapons systems, she might win, too. But it wasnât worth the risk of the Covenant capturing her refinements to their technology.

Cortana fired *Ascendant Justice*âs aft plasma turrets, and laserlike beams flickered across space. A squadron of Seraph fighters disintegrated as they launched from the closest carrier. Explosions bubbled and mushroomed inside the carrierâs launch bay.

She didnât stay to watch the fireworks.

Cortana dived at flank speed straight toward the center of Reach. The surface of the planet raced toward her. She wondered where the Chief was now, and if he was safe.

âI should have never told you to be careful,â she whispered. âYouâre incapable of that. I should have wished you victory. Thatâs what youâre good at, John. Winning.â

She initiated the Slipspace generator; space distorted, teased apart, and light enveloped the flagship.

Chapter Nineteen

Time: Date Error \ Estimated 0530 Hours, September 23, 2552 (Military Calendar) \ Aboard Captured Covenant Dropship, Epsilon Eridani System, En Route to Surface of Reach.

The Master Chief stood on the deck of the Covenant dropship. He stood because the crash seats had been designed for Elites and Jackals and none of the contours fit his human backbone. It didnât matterâhe preferred to stand.

They drifted through the upper atmosphere of Reach, descending like a spider on a thousand-kilometer thread of silk. They passed close to a hundred other ships moving in orbital arcsâSeraph fighters, other dropships, scavenger craft with grappling tentacles that dragged sections of salvaged metal. Dominating the skies were a pair of three-hundred-meter-long cruisers.

The cruisers accelerated toward them.

The Chief moved up to the cockpit where Polaski and Haverson sat in the seats they had removed from the Longsword and welded in place.

âTheyâre pinging us,â Polaski whispered.

âNice and easy, Warrant Officer,â Lieutenant Haverson whispered. âJust use the programmed response Cortana gave us.â

âAye aye, Lieutenant,â Polaski replied and concentrated on the Covenant scripts that scrolled across the display on her left. âSending now.â She tapped a holographic icon.

Sergeant Johnson and Corporal Locklear stood two meters behind the Chief, both of them nervous. Johnson chewed his stub of cigar and scowled at the incoming Covenant warships. Locklearâs trigger finger twitched, and beads of sweat dotted his forehead.

âCortana has this stuff wired tight,â Sergeant Johnson whispered. âNo worries.â

âI got *plenty* of worries here,â Locklear muttered. âMan, Iâd rather be in a HEV pod on fire and out of control than up here.

Weâre sitting ducks.â

âQuiet,â Lieutenant Haverson hissed at Locklear. âLet the lady concentrate.â

Polaski kept one eye on the communications screen and one eye on the external displays as the twin cruisers grew larger, filling the holographic space before her. Both her hands hovered over the flight yoke, not touching it, but twitching in anticipation.

Three Seraph fighters burned out of their orbits and took a closer pass.

âIs that an attack vector?â Lieutenant Haverson asked.

âI donât think so,â Polaski said. âBut itâs hard to tell with those things.â

Locklear inhaled deeply, and the Chief noticed that he didnât exhale. He set his hand on the manâs shoulder and pulled him aside. âRelax, Marine,â he whispered. âThatâs an order.â

Locklear exhaled and ran a hand over his smoothly shaven head. âRightâ¦right, Chief.â With effort, the Marine forced himself to calm down.

A red light flashed on the control panel. âCollision warning,â Polaski said with the practiced nonchalance all Navy pilots had in the face of imminent death. She reached for the yoke.

âHold your course,â the Lieutenant ordered.

âYes, sir,â she said, and released the controls. âFighters one hundred meters and closing.â

âHold your course,â Lieutenant Haverson repeated. âTheyâre just taking a closer look,â he whispered to himself, âand thereâs nothing to see. Nothing to see at all.â

When the Seraph fighters were only ten meters away, they tumbled to either side of the dropship. Their engine pods flared blue and they looped overheadâ¦then moved to rejoin the cruisers.

The larger ships passed directly overhead and blotted out the sun. In the darkness, the cockpit lights automatically adjusted and flooded the display panels with the purple-blue frequency the Covenant favored.

The Master Chief realized that he, too, had been holding his breath. Maybe he and Locklear were more alike than he had realized.

He took a closer look at the ODST: The wild, desperate look

in his eyes and the flaming-comet tattoo covering his left deltoid seemed almost alien to the Master Chief. The man had survived the Covenant and the Flood on Halo, and he had been lucky and resourceful enough to escape in one piece. True, his emotional responses were uncontainedâ¦but give him the same augmentations and a set of MJOLNIR armor and what was the difference between the two of them? Experience? Training? Discipline?

Luck?

John had always felt the other men and women in the UNSC were different; heâd felt at ease only with the other Spartans. But werenât they all fighting and dying for the same reason?

The ruddy light from Epsilon Eridani suddenly filled the cockpit as the two cruisers passed on.

Polaski sighed, slumped forward, and wiped the sweat from her brow.

Locklear reached into his shirt pocket, removed a clean and pressed red bandanna, and offered it to Polaski.

She looked at it for a second, then glanced at the Corporal, then took it. âThanks, Locklear.â She folded it into a headband, flipped her blond hair from her face, and tied it around her forehead.

âNo problem, maâam,â Locklear replied. âAnytime.â

âLocking onto the signal source,â Lieutenant Haverson said. âCourse two-three-zero by one-one-zero.â

âTwo-three-zero by one-one-zero, aye,â Polaski said. She gently pushed forward and turned the yoke.

The dropship smoothly banked into a gentle dive. The surface of Reach disappeared from the screens as the dropship entered the thick clouds of smoke that wreathed the planet.

There was a quiet *beep*, and the display filters activated. A moment later, images resolved on the display screensâhundreds of thousands of hectares of raging firestorms and blackened char where there had once stood forests and fields.

John tried not to think of this as Reach anymoreâit was only one more world the Covenant had taken.

âThat canyon,â Lieutenant Haverson said and pointed at a fissure where the earth had been eroded in a sinuous twisting scar. âScanners are just picking up surface information. Letâs get a closer look.â

âUnderstood.â Polaski inverted the ship, executed a reversed roll, and dropped into the canyon. When she righted the dropship, sculpted rock walls raced past them only thirty meters to either side.

The Lieutenant reached for the backpack COM system they had removed from the Longsword. He fine-tuned the frequency of the unusual signal they were homing in on; a six-tone message played, followed by a two-second pause, and then it repeated.

âOpen a channel on that E-band, Lieutenant,â the Master Chief said. âIâll need to send the countersignal.â

âChannel open, Chief. Go ahead.â

The Master Chief linked his COM and encrypted the channel so only those people sending the signal would hear him. *âOly Oly Oxen Free,â* he spoke into his microphone. âAll out in the free. Weâre all free.â

The beeping over the backpack COM speaker suddenly stopped.

âSignalâs gone.â Lieutenant Haverson snapped his head around and stared at the Master Chief. âIâm not sure what you just told them, but whatever it was, they heard you.â

âGood,â the Master Chief replied. âSet us down somewhere safe. Theyâll find us.â

âThereâs an overhang ahead,â Polaski said. She moved the ship toward a deep shadow along the starboard side where the cliff angled out from the canyon. âIâll put us down there.â She spun the ship, backed into the darkness, and set it down light as a feather.

âOpen the side hatch,â the Chief told Polaski. âIâll go out alone and make sure itâs safe.â

âAlone?â Lieutenant Haverson asked. He rose from his seat. âAre you certain thatâs wise, Chief?â

âYes, sir. This was my idea. If itâs a trap, I want to be the one to set it off. You stay here and back me up.â

Haverson drummed his long fingers across his chin, thinking. âVery well, Chief.â

âI got your six, Master Chief,â Locklear said and unslung his assault rifle.

The Spartan nodded to Locklear and marched down the ramp. The Chief wanted them on board the dropship for two reasons. First, if this was a trap and they were all caught out in the open,

he wouldnât have time to save them *and* himself. Second, if the Covenant were here, waiting, then Haverson and the others had to get away and get Cortana back to Earth. He could buy them the time to make it out alive.

At the bottom of the ramp, he hesitated as his motion tracker pinged off a single signal. Thereâthirty meters ahead, just behind a large boulder: The friend-or-foe identification system tagged the contact as neither Covenant nor UNSC.

The Chief drew his pistol, crouched, and crept forward.

A private COM channel snapped on: *âMaster Chief, relax. Itâs me.â*

Another Spartan stepped out from the cover of the rock. His armorâwhile not as battered as Johnâsâwas covered with scuffs and burns; the left shoulder pauldron had been dented.

The Master Chief felt a surge of relief. His teammates, his family, hadnât all been killed. He recognized the Spartan from his voice and the subtle way he glanced right and left. It was SPARTAN 044, Anton. He was one of the unitâs best scouts. The two stood there a moment and then Anton moved his hand, making a quick, short gesture with his index and forefinger over the faceplate of his helmet where his mouth would be. That was their signal for a smileâthe closest any Spartan got to an emotional outburst.

John returned the gesture.

âGood to see you, too,â John said. âHow many are left?â

âThree, Master Chief, and one other make up our team. Apologies for the disabled FOF tag, but weâre trying to confuse the Covenant forces in this area.â He looked again to his left and right. âIâd rather not give a full report in the open.â He motioned toward the shadows of the cliff face.

John flashed his acknowledgment light and the two Spartans jogged out of the center of the ravine, both keeping their eyes on the rim of the canyon overhead.

The Master Chief had plenty of questions for Anton, however. Like, why had his team split from Red Team? Where was Red Team? And why hadnât the Covenant glassed every square centimeter of Reach yet?

âYou okay, Chief?â Lieutenant Haversonâs voice broke in from the COM.

âAffirmative, sir. Contact made with a Spartan. Stand by.â

Anton halted before a dark cavern entrance. It was difficult to see, even with image enhancement; there was only the faint outline of a tunnel in the shadows of the cliff face. Just inside were reinforcing steel I-beams painted matte black, and beyond there were two-meter-wide boulders with chainguns bolted to their sides. Each gun was crewed by a Spartanâwhom John recognized as Grace 093 and Li 008.

When they saw John they gave him the *smile* gesture, which he returned.

Grace followed the Master Chief and Anton into the cavern. Li remained to operate the guns.

The Master Chief blinked as his eyes adjusted to the harsh fluorescent lights that illuminated the interior of the cavern. The walls had a grooved texture, as if theyâd been dug out by machinery. Standing before a foldout card table in the center of the cavern was another man, in a Navy uniform.

The Master Chief stiffened and saluted. âAdmiral, sir!â

Vice Admiral Danforth Whitcomb, despite his Western European name and Texas drawl, claimed to have descended from Russian Cossacks. He had the physique of a large bear, a closely shaved and polished head, eyes so dark they could have been made of coal, and a salt-and-pepper mustache that drooped over his upper lip and dangled off the edge of his chin.

âMaster Chief.â The Admiral snapped off a crisp salute. âAt ease, son. Damn good to see you.â He strode to the Chief and shook his handâa gesture very few non-Spartans cared to endureâpressing bare flesh into a cold unyielding gauntlet that could pulverize their bones. âWelcome to Camp Independence. Accommodations ainât four starâ¦but we call it home.â

âThank you, sir.â

John had never worked with the Admiral before, but his accomplishments during the battles for New Constantinople and the Siege of the Atlas Moons were well known. Every Spartan had studied Whitcombâs record.

John opened a COM channel to Lieutenant Haverson. âMove up, sir. All clear.â

âRoger,â Haverson said. *âOn our way.â*

âIâm happy to see you, Chief,â Admiral Whitcomb said, âso donât take this the wrong way, but what the hell are you doing here? Keyes had orders to take you on a mission deep into

Covenant territory.â

âYes, sir. Itâsâ¦a long story.â

The Admiral twisted the end of his mustache, glanced at his wristwatch, and smiled. âWe got the time, son. Letâs hear it.â

John sat on a rock and recounted to the Admiral what had happened since he had left Reach: the recovery of the NAV database on Gamma Station, the *Pillar of Autumn*âs harrowing escape, the discovery of the Halo construct and its eccentric caretaker, 343 Guilty Spark. He hesitated, then described his encounters with the Flood and subsequent destruction of Halo, ending with his capture of the Covenant flagship.

During the story, Lieutenant Haverson and the others from the dropship arrived. They remained silent as the Master Chief told the tale.

The Admiral listened without speaking a word. As John finished, the man gave a slow, low whistle and sat contemplating it all.

âThatâs one hell of a tale. And if it had come from anyone but you, Iâd order a psych exam.â He stood and paced. He stopped and frowned. âI believe it allâ¦but something still doesnât add up.â His face wrinkled as he thought. âCanât quite put my finger on it, though.â

âSir,â Lieutenant Haverson meekly said. âPardon me for asking, but how is it you are alive? Here?â

The Admiral smiled. âWell, thatâs another long story, Lieutenant. Let me give you the short-and-sweet version.â He leaned against the cavern wall and crossed his arms over his chest.

âThe second those Covenant bastards entered the system I knew Reach was history. The Covenant donât do anything halfway. Everyone planetside was busy evacuatingâwhich was the right thing to doâbut I had to stay behind.â Several emotions played across the Admiralâs face: concern, amusementâ¦and then his features settled into a firm stare as he looked into the past, recalling what happened.

âWeâd been working on a new bomb, called the Nova. It was a cluster of nukes, each with a lithium triteride casing. Now, these things, in theory, when they detonate, not only make a big bang like you expect a nuke toâbut they also force their tritium cases together in one big superheated and pressurized center.â

He made a fist and slammed it into his other palm for emphasis. âBoosts the yield a hundredfold.â A grin spread across his face. âPlanet killers. We had planned to use these things in space battles to level the playing field.â

His grin faded and he stroked his mustache. âWell, things didnât quite turn out as planned, and we got caught flat-footed with those Novas on the ground. So I decided to repurpose them.â

Lieutenant Haversonâs face wrinkled with confusion. He didnât dare interrupt, but the Admiral saw his expression and said, âThink, son. All that ordnance around with plenty of Covenant to blow up.â

Haverson shook his head. âIâm sorry, sir. I still donât understand.â

âIntelligence officer, huh?â Whitcomb snorted and turned to the Master Chief. âWhat would you have done?â

âArm them, sir,â the Master Chief replied. âActivate the fail-safe tampering detonators and start a countdown timer. Say, two weeks.â

The Admiral nodded. âI gave it only ten days. Thereâs no need to give them too much time to tinker.â

He set one of his heavy hands on Lieutenant Haversonâs shoulder, and Haverson flinched. âThey are two possible outcomes to this plan, Lieutenant. Either the Covenant pack up the Novas and take them home for studyâa possibility I pray to God happens. A bomb like that would crack their home world in half. Or the bombs stay hereâand theyâll stop the Covenant on Reach.â

âI see, sir,â Lieutenant Haverson replied in a whisper, then glanced at his watch. âThis was how many days ago?â

âGot plenty of time left,â the Admiral told him. âAround twenty hours.â

Lieutenant Haverson swallowed.

âThereâs just one snag in that plan, though.â The Admiral removed his hand from Haverson and his gaze settled onto the dirt floor of the cavern. âI had a team of MarinesâCharlie Companyâthat got wiped out before we could get to those Novas.â He sighed. âBrave kids. A damned waste of good men. Thatâs when I picked up Red Team on coded COM. I âconvincedâ them to lend me a few of your Spartans. We got to

the Novas, armed them, and weâve been raising eight kinds of hell down here with hit-and-run exercisesâjust to keep everyone busy, you understand. Wouldnât want to get bored.â

âAnd the rest of Red Team, sir?â the Master Chief asked.

Whitcomb shook his head. âWe got one last transmission from them before they said they were falling back.â He walked to the table, unrolled an old paper topological map, and pointed at Menachite Mountain. âHere. Where ONI had their CASTLE base.â He paused. âBut the Covenant are tearing that mountain apart, rock by rock. I want to believe theyâre still thereâ¦but weâve counted at least a dozen companies. Those Covenant have air support, close orbit patrols, and, on the ground, armor. The place is a fortress. Could anyone survive?â

The Master Chief scrutinized the lines on the map and had an answer for the Admiral. âTheyâre underground,â he said. âThe CASTLE facility. We did a lot of training there. The Covenant can fill up those tunnels with only so many search parties.â

âThen you think they all have a chance?â

âYes, sir. More than a chance. Iâd guarantee theyâre in there. Thatâs where Iâd be.â

The Admiral set his fingertip on the representation of Menachite Mountain, tapped it twice, thinking, and then suddenly looked up. âYou got into this canyon in a captured Covenant ship, right? A dropship?â

âYes, sir.â John hadnât told him that. Despite his brusque manner, the Admiral knew his business.

âThen weâll go get them, son.â

âSir!â Lieutenant Haverson said. âWith all due respect, sir, our first priority should be to get back to Earth. The intelligence weâve gathered on the Halo construct, the technology aboard the flagship weâve capturedâ¦Cortanaâs Slipspace calculations alone could turn the tide of this war for us.â

âI know all that,â the Admiral replied tersely. âAnd youâre three hundred percent correct, Lieutenant. Butââhe tapped the map again with his meaty forefingerââI wonât leave a single man or woman behind on this planet for the Covenant to tear apart for sport. No way. And that goes double for a Spartan. Weâre going in.â

Chapter Twenty

Time: Date Record Anomaly \ Estimated 0610 Hours, September 23, 2552 (Military Calendar) \ Aboard Captured Covenant Dropship, Epsilon Eridani System, En Route to Surface of Reach.

Polaski accelerated the captured dropship to its maximum velocityâjust under Mach 1. The craft arced up and joined the long convoy of Covenant shipsâtroop transports, scavenger drones, and Seraph fightersâas they descended from a higher orbit down to the surface. The formation of alien vessels headed straight toward Menachite Mountain.

Covenant communiquÃ©s scrolled across a screen next to the pilotâs seat and then ceased.

âIncoming transmissions from the convoyâ¦I guess they donât like strays,â Polaski muttered calmly, looking at the Covenant calligraphy.

âTheyâre not shooting,â the Admiral said, gripping the back of Polaskiâs seat. âWeâre fine. Just fly, Warrant Officer.â He turned to the Master Chief. âGet âem ready, son.â

The Chief nodded and moved aft to the rest of the squad. His three Spartans as well as Lieutenant Haverson, Locklear, and Sergeant Johnson stood over an array of weapons laid out on the deck. Anton ticked off the inventory: âShotguns, a fuel rod gun, Jackhammer rocket launchers, plasma and HE pistols, and every type of grenadeâtake your pick.â

The Chief picked up five clips of ammunition for his MA5B assault rifle, three frag grenades, and a shotgun for close work. Nothing fancyâhe wanted to keep it simple so he could keep one eye on the rest of his team.

Locklear hefted the fuel rod gun, grunting from the exertion. The weapon glowed an eerie green along its fuel casing.

Grace relieved him of the too-heavy weapon and shouldered it with ease.

âMake sure you get a handgun,â the Chief told Locklear. âWeâll be in close quarters underground.â

âRoger that,â Locklear said.

âWeâre close,â the Admiral called out.

The Master Chief moved back to the cockpit to watch. The line of dropships and drones maneuvered toward a pile of truck-sized stones that had been carved from the mountain. A spiraling hole, ten kilometers across, sat where Menachite Mountain had once risen majestic and impregnable, covered with forests and glaciers.

It was only a strip mine now, with a single shaft drilled down its center. A Covenant cruiser hovered over the shaft, and the purple glow of a grav lift knifed into the hole.

âThatâs our LZ,â Whitcomb announced. âPolaski, I want you to drive this crate straight downâbut ease up a tad on the engines and let their grav beam do the work. Itâll take us all the way down to whateverâs at the bottom.â

âWith respect, Admiral,â Polaski said, âIâm not sure weâll fit.â

The Admiral squinted at the hole. âWeâll fit,â he said. âI have every confidence in you, Warrant Officer. Now make it quick. I donât think anyone topside is going to think us going down there is a good idea.â

âYes, sir!â Her eyes locked onto the hole. âNo problem, sir.â

The Master Chief marveled at the Admiralâs lack of fear. He trusted the manâs judgment; he had been criticized during his campaigns for unorthodox tactics and strategies, but his insight had been proven correct each time. The Master Chief, however, also had observed that the higher up the chain of command you received your orders, the more likely those orders would demand the near impossible.

âHang on,â the Chief called up to his team.

Polaski nosed the Covenant dropship over and plummeted into the dark purple scintillating grav beam. The instant they entered the field, the ship jumped, accelerated, and shuddered into the hole drilled through solid rock.

Cut off from the thin shreds of sunlight above, the ship went dark. The internal running lights glowed a faint blue.

âWeâve got no room to maneuver in here,â Polaski whispered.

Lieutenant Haverson climbed forward. âAdmiral Whitcomb, sir, I see how we can get inâassuming this hole leads somewhereâbut itâs the other part of your plan thatâs unclear.

Whatâs our exit strategy, sir?â

The Admiralâs steely glare pinned Haverson. âIâve got it figured out. You just shoot when I tell you to and keep it all puckered up tight. Got it?â

Haverson clenched his jaw, looking extremely unsatisfied. âYes, sir.â

Polaski focused intently on the walls of the tunnel rushing toward her craft. âShort-range sensors have a contact,â she said. âIt looks like the bottom of the shaft. ETA sixty seconds at this speed.â

The Admiral leaned closer to the Chief and whispered, âWeâre gonna get hit heavy by whateverâs down there. You make sure you hit them back three times harder. Then you get Anton on point and see if he canât locate your Spartans. Iâm guessing theyâve gone to ground.â

Before the Chief could reply, the Admiral moved aft and grabbed an assault rifle and two HE pistols. He clipped plasma and frag grenades to his belt.

âThirty seconds,â Polaski called out. She cut the engines, and the dropship coasted on the grav beam only. âThereâs something down there,â she said. âIs that sunlight?â

The dropship emerged into a titanic roomâthree kilometers across, circular, with a dozen galleries circumscribing the space. Overhead, a holographic sun and a dozen moons wheeled along its domed ceiling. Except for the hole drilled into the mountain by the Covenant, the holographic projection was perfect.

The Admiral scrutinized the room, and his dark eyes locked onto a gathering of Covenant forces on the floor, near one edge of the great room. âThere,â he said, and pointed. âI make out about a hundred of them: a few Elites, Jackals, mostly Grunts. Looks like theyâre clearing a cave-in and not ready for company yet. Good.

âPolaski, land us half a kilometer from âem and then dust off. I want you back in that hole ASAP. Plug it up. We donât want to leave our back door wide open.â

âAye, sir,â Polaski replied.

Admiral Whitcomb addressed Li. âYouâre our rear guard, son. Stay here and guard the ship with Polaski. Sorry.â

âSir! Yes, sir,â Li replied. The Master Chief detected a hint of bitterness in the Spartanâs voice for drawing what he

undoubtedly would think was soft duty.

Their dropship eased lower until it was a meter above the blue tiles of the room; the side hatches opened. The Chief jumped out first, followed by Anton, Lieutenant Haverson, and Locklear. From the hatch on the opposite side leapt the Admiral, Sergeant Johnson, and Grace.

The dropship immediately rose into the hole in the ceiling, far enough in to be shielded from any stray ground fire.

âMove, everyone,â the Admiral growled. He pointed at Grace and Locklear. âYou two, fire long-range weapons. Everyone else, haul ass. Take them out, people.â

The Admiralâs plan was sound. He wasnât risking the dropshipâtheir only means of escapeâby landing too close to the enemy. They still had the element of surprise; the Covenant would have never anticipated an assault on the heart of their operation.

But how long would this advantage last? How long before that cruiser blasted their dropship to atoms? The Covenant were not their most dangerous enemy. Time was.

Grace paused, muscled the fuel rod gun to a forty-five-degree angle into the air, and launched a round. The alien weapon hissed and spat a glowing sphere of energy. The blast arced over the half-kilometer distance, impacted, and exploded in a green flash. Grunts and Jackals flew through the air.

Locklear fired two Jackhammer rockets, then dropped the spent launcher. The pair of rockets connected with a cluster of Elites who hadâuntil a second agoâbeen running the show. The twin explosion obscured that end of the room with billowing clouds of dust, fire, and smoke.

The Master Chief motioned for his team to spread out and move forward at a jog.

Ahead there were silhouetted Grunts and Jackals in the dust clouds, screaming and shooting at the air, each other, anything that moved.

âKeep moving,â the Master Chief said. âMove while they donât know whatâs hit them.â

Anton paused and knelt next to a set of tracks dug into the tiled floor. âKellyâs been this way,â he reported over the COM.

The Master Chief clicked on Red Teamâs COM frequency. âKelly? Fred? Joshua? Spartans, acknowledge this signal.â

Only static answered him.

A hundred meters from the stunned Covenant work crew, a stray plasma bolt fired from the hazy, rubble-strewn region detonated a few meters from the Master Chief. He sent a spray of automatic fire across the area, hoping to force the enemy to keep their heads down.

Grace halted and fired the fuel rod gun again. A second glowing burst of radioactive energy flashed overhead and detonated along the far wall.

In the intense light, the Master Chief saw that a dozen Jackals had braced themselves along the wall and overlapped their energy shields to create a phalanx. Behind them five Elites readied plasma rifles.

âDown,â he shouted, and dived to one side.

Grace hit the floor and rolled away. Plasma bolts sizzled over their heads, and the Master Chiefâs shields drained as a shot hit too close. The barrage turned several of the blue tiles around him into a crater of blackened glass.

âGrenadesâup and over those shields, Spartans,â Admiral Whitcomb bellowed.

The Master Chief and Anton primed plasma grenades and hurled them from their prone positions. They hit the far wall and dropped into the cluster of Elites and Jackalsâ*behind* their shields. There was a pair of blue flashes, and the enemy formation blew apart. Jackals scattered and ran.

Grace fired the fuel rod gun, hit the broken phalanx formation, and blew them literally to bits. She dropped the weapon. âRad counter at max dosage,â she called out. âThis thingâs too hot to use anymore.â

âBack away!â the Chief ordered. âThose things have a fail-safe!â

Grace sprang back, just in time. The fallen fuel rod gun sparked, sputtered, and then blew with the force of a frag grenade. Blackened, twisted tile rained down on them.

Locklear jogged up and fired at the Grunts fleeing the excavation. They werenât armed. Locklear mowed them down without remorse.

From a pile of shattered stone, a pair of battered Elites struggled to rise. Blood and bone exploded outward from their chests, and they spun around toward the source of this

forceâboulders pushed away from the blocked passage. Three Spartans emerged from their cover, assault rifles smoking from their recent discharge.

John knew instantly the three were Kelly, Fred, and Will.

He ran forward to meet them.

Fred lowered his weapon. âAntonâ¦Graceâ¦John?â he said disbelievingly.

The Master Chief opened a COM channel to his Spartans. âItâs me. I wish I had time to explain everything. I willâlater. Letâs get the hell out of here first.â

Kelly quickly reached out and swiped her two fingers across Johnâs faceplate.

He wanted to return the smile, but at that moment Admiral Whitcomb, running full force, skidded to a stop next to the Spartans. He was followed in short order by Haverson, Locklear, and Johnson, who kept looking over his shoulder to scan the huge empty room around them.

âIs this everyone?â Admiral Whitcomb asked.

âNo, sir,â Fred replied. âThereâs one more.â He turned and extended his hand back into the partially collapsed tunnel. âMaâam? Itâs safe to come out.â

For a heartbeat the Master Chief forgot that he was in the heart of an enemyâs camp; he forgot about the war, that Reach had fallen, and everything else he had gone through in the last few days. He had never thought he would see her again.

Dr. Halsey emerged from the partially caved-in tunnel. She brushed dust from the hem of her skirt and lab coat with one slender hand.

âAdmiral Whitcomb,â she said, âa pleasure to see you again. My thanks for the rescue. It was far timelier than you could imagine.â She turned to the Master Chief. âOr is it you I have to thank for this daring operation, John?â

The Master Chief found he had no words to answer. He also bristled at her casual use of his given nameâ¦but he could forgive her that. She had always used his nameânever his rank or serial number.

He noticed the fist-sized crystal clutched in her hand. It had a thousand facets and emitted a brilliant blue light the color of sapphires and sunlight on water.

âThank anyone you want, Catherine,â Admiral Whitcomb

said. âThrow us all a party if thatâll make you happyâ¦once weâre out of here.â He clicked open his COM. âPolaski, get downââ

Sergeant Johnson set his hand on the Admiralâs arm and nodded toward the far wall.

âWhat is it, Sergeant?â The Admiralâs voice died in his throat.

The Master Chiefâs motion tracker flickered on his heads-up display, but there was no solid contactâ¦nor did he see anything across the entire three-kilometer-wide cavern. Had it picked up a camouflaged Elite? No, the dust in the air would have certainly given it away.

âNo one move,â the Admiral whispered.

John saw them, then. He saw them all.

He had missed them before because he had thought it was the haze in the air rippling, the dust, maybe the distance causing a miragelike image. He hadnât thought it possible for so many Covenant to be so still.

On each level of the twelve tiered galleries that circumscribed the gigantic room stood Covenant soldiers. The balconies were crowded with Grunts, Jackals whose energy shields popped on, snarling Elites, and several pairs of Hunters with fuel rod cannons glowing green.

The whine of thousands of plasma weapons charging filled the air like a swarm of locusts.

No one moved. No one breathed except Locklear, who exhaled a long and heartfelt expletive.

John tried to count them all. There had to be thousandsâon every level. A battalion at least, maybe more. They wouldnât even have to aim. All they had to do was shoot and fill the space with needle shards and boiling energy.

Theyâd be vaporized before they could get halfway to the tunnel at their backs.

A Hunter pair roared with rage; they leveled their fuel rod cannons at John and his team and, with steady aim, discharged their weapons.

A split second later the rest of the alien horde opened fire.

Chapter Twenty-One

Time: Date Record Anomaly \ Estimated 0640 Hours, September 23, 2552 (Military Calendar) \ Aboard Captured Covenant Flagship *Ascendant Justice*, Periphery of Epsilon Eridani System.

Ascendant Justice emerged from the non-Euclidian, non-Einsteinian realms that humans had erroneously called âSlipspace.â There was neither âspaceâ nor anything to âslipâ across in the alternate dimensions.

The ship displaced a cloud of ice crystals that had for millennia been melted and refrozen into delicate weblike geometries. *Ascendant Justice*âs running lights diffused through these particles and made a glimmering halo of hard-edged reflections. It reminded Cortana of the snowglobe that Dr. Halsey had kept on her desk: the Matterhorn and a little Swiss climber scaling its three-centimeter heightâall swirling in the center of a microscopic blizzard.

The frozen Oort cloud around her was significantly larger, but it was still a charming effect and a welcome sight from the abyss of Slipspace.

Cortana had fled the Epsilon Eridani system, but only to its edgeâa short jump of a few billion kilometers from Reach and the Master Chief.

The odds that the Covenant would find her were longâastronomical, in fact, even if they had ships on patrol. The Oort cloudâs volume was too large to search in a hundred years. Still, she powered down virtually every system on the ship except the fusion generatorsâand her own power systems, of course.

The ship drifted in the icy dark.

She redlined the reactors, however, to recharge the Slipspace capacitors and regenerate the plasma she had expended in her brief fight with the Covenant cruisers.

If she was part of a larger fleet, her desperate tactics might be valuableâflashing all her plasma away and the near-gravity Slipspace jumpâbut as one ship against a dozen, her effective

combat lifetime using those tactics could be measured in microseconds.

And now the Covenant knew that *Ascendant Justice* was not one of theirs. She hoped the Master Chief would elude themâfind his Spartans and somehow meet her at the rendezvous coordinatesâall without getting blown up by enemy ground forces and the Covenant fleet.

She paused and reset her emotion subroutinesâthe AI equivalent of a deep sigh. Cortana had to remain focused and think of *something* useful to do while she waited.

The problem was that sheâd been thinking at peak capacity for the last five days. And now she was thinking with a large portion of her mind occupied by the data absorbed from the Halo construct.

She again toyed with the idea of dumping that data into *Ascendant Justice*âs onboard memory. Now that the other AI had been erased, it should be safe. Yet one piece of technological data had already been leaked to the enemyâ¦and that could have extreme repercussions in the war effort. If the Halo data got into Covenant hands, the war would be over.

She decided she would make do with her available memory-processing bandwidth.

Cortana listened and looked to the center of the Epsilon Eridani system with *Ascendant Justice*âs passive sensors. Faint Covenant communiquÃ©s whispered past herâeight hours old, because thatâs how long it took the signal to travel from Reach to here.

Interesting. The present in-system chatter was undoubtedly focused on the intruders. Eight hours ago, however, it had been business as usualâ¦whatever business that was.

She eavesdropped on the data streams, translating, and tried to make sense of it all.

Among the more coherent samples of their excited religious babble were: *uncovering the fragment of divinity,* and *illuminating shard of the gods to exist the perfect moment that vanishes in the blink of an eye but lasts forever,* and *collecting the stars left by the giants.*

A literal translation was not a problem. It was the meaning behind the words that eluded her. Without the proper cultural references, this was all gibberish.

It had to mean something to someone, however. Perhaps she could use part of the dissected Covenant AI to help. It had spoken to her, so it was partially fluent with human idioms. She might be able to reverse-engineer *its* translation software.

Cortana isolated the AI code and began the retrieval-and-unpacking process. This would take time; sheâd compressed the code, and the reconstitution process would require a good deal of her reduced processing power.

While she waited, she examined the Covenant reactors. They used a pinched magnetic field to heat the tritium plasma. It was surprisingly primitive. Without better hardware, though, there was little she could do to improve their effectiveness.

Power. She needed more if she was going to head back in-system to rendezvous with the Master Chief. The Covenant werenât going to sit by and wait for them to hook up, bid a fond *adieu*, and then escape.

Logically, there was only one way to do this: She was going to have to fight and kill them all.

She could conserve her shipâs power and fire the plasma weapons as they were designed. That, however, would only delay the inevitable. A dozen ships against oneâeven Captain Keyes wouldnât have survived such a lopsided tactical situation.

She deliberated how to solve this problem, spun off a multitasking routine that listed her resources, and filtered them in a creativityâprobability matrix, hoping to find an inspired match.

The unpacking of the alien AIâs routines finished. The code appeared to her as a vast cross section of geological strata: gray granite variables and bloodred sandstone visual processors and oily dark function films. But there were dozens of code layers she didnât even recognize.

The translation algorithms, however, were in the top layers of this structure, glistening like a vein of gold-laced quartz. She tapped into the software; it had infinite loops and dead-end code linesâthings that had to be errors.

Yet there were also slender crystalline translation vectors that she would never have thought of on her own. She copied those and slaved them to her dynamic lexicon.

The distant Covenant transmissions poured though her mind, now somewhat more coherent: *Inner temple layers penetrated;*

Infidels present and *Cleansing operation ongoing; Victory is assured* and *The Great Oneâs purity will burn the infidels; The holy light cannot be tainted.*

She picked up on the urgent undertone to these transmissions, as if the notorious Covenant confidence were not entirely genuine.

Since these messages made reference to an infestation to be cleansed, and since these transmissions occurred many hours before the *Ascendant Justice* had entered the Epsilon Eridani system, the Master Chief had been correct in his conclusions: There were human survivors on Reach. Likely Spartans.

His correct analysis of the situation based on the six-note signal irritated Cortana. It annoyed her more that she had not concluded this as well. It made her realize how dangerously close to the edge of her intellectual capacity she operated.

One of her alert routines triggered. An access hatch on the route from the bridge to the reactor roomâone that she had specifically directed Sergeant Johnson *not* to weld shutâjust opened.

âThe trap is loaded,â she whispered.

Cortana scanned the region with the shipâs internal sensors. There was nothingâ¦unless that ânothingâ was actually a group of camouflaged Elitesâperhaps the âGuardian of the Luminous Keyâ mentioned in the Covenantâs greeting communiquÃ©.

She tripped the emergency hull breach shut on four bulkhead doorsâtwo on each side of this opened hatch.

âTrap is sprung,â she remarked.

Cortana vented the atmosphere in this sealed section.

She hoped that they had left the vent system open behind themâdooming any others left behind to a similar asphyxiation.

Her sensors picked up a plasma grenade detonation on the inner port set of doors she had sealed and locked. The discharge scrambled those circuits and disabled the locks. She noted that the doors were being slowly openedâ¦but not enough to reach the second set of sealed doors ahead.

The opening of those doors halted.

âGotcha,â she whispered.

Sheâd keep that section of *Ascendant Justice* sealed until Sergeant Johnson could confirm the kills. She wouldnât let her guard down, either. There had to be additional alien saboteurs

aboard her ship. And if she found them, sheâd deal with them in the same efficient fashion.

This minor distraction resolved, Cortana returned her attention to the Covenant AIâs code. Small portions of the alien software looked like her. The odds of such a parallel evolution in computer science seemed improbable. It was almost as if it were her codeâ¦only copied many times, each time with subtle errors introduced by the replication process.

Could the Covenant have captured a human-made AI, copied it, and then used the result in their ships? If soâwhy had there been the need to replicate the code so many times? And with so many errors?

This theory didnât track, however. Smart AIs like her had an operational life span of approximately seven years. After that the processing memory became too interconnected and developed fatal endless feedback loops. In essence, smart AIs became too smart and suffered an exponential attenuation of function; they literally *thought* themselves to death.

So if the Covenant were using human-created AIs, all the copies would be dead within seven yearsâthere was no reason to recopy the copies. It wouldnât extend their life span, because all the memory-processor interconnections had to be copied as well.

Cortana paused to consider how much of *her* life span had been compromised by absorbing and analyzing the data from Halo. Her experiences within the Forerunner computer system had certainly pushed her intellect far past its designed limits. Had she burned away half her âlifeâ doing so? More? She stored that thought for later consideration. If she didnât find a way to get the Master Chief and get back to Earth, her operational life span would be even shorter.

She was, however, curious about one thing: She ran a trace on the origin of the copied pathways of the alien AI, and found its replication routine. This copying code was extremely convoluted; in fact, it took up more than two thirds of the Covenant AIâs processor-memory space. It was dark with functions that ran deep to the core. It spread dendritic fingers through the system, like a cancer that had metastasized throughout the AIâs entire body.

She did not understand any of it.

But she didnât have to *understand* the code to *use* it.

Was it worth the risk of using? Perhaps. If she could mitigate the risk, sheâd copy a portion of herself onto an isolated system in *Ascendant Justice*. She could always erase this subsystem if anything went wrong.

The potential rewards of this operation were great. She might be able to restore herself to full operational capacityâeven carrying the Halo data.

Cortana double- and triple-checked the system she would overwrite: the Covenant software that managed the life support on the lower decks. Since the lower decks were now evacuated and cold, life support was moot. She carefully severed the connections from that subsystem to the rest of the ship.

She also rechecked her thinking. This copying software was likely responsible for the Covenant AIâs fractured thinking. Her thinking, however, was being squeezed to nothing. There had to be a balance between these two deleterious states.

Cortana initialized the Covenant file-duplication software. It moved, and the entire thing pulsed and reached for her; she immediately shut down all contact with her translation suite.

The dark functions touched her code, wrapped around them, pushed against the barriers she had erected.

It happened too fast, but she didnât stop the process. It was far too interesting to stop.

She distantly felt that portion of her mind blur and replicate, assembled line by line into its new location within *Ascendant Justice*. It felt strange. Not that it was strange she could think in more than one place about more than one thing at the same timeâshe was used to multiprocessing.

This was *different* strangeâas if she had a glimpse into something wonderfulâ¦and infinite.

The replication ceased, and the copying code was once again inert and safely stored with the dissected Covenant AIâs directory.

Cortana ran her entire system; nothing else had been altered.

She checked the new copied system. It was intact, and, apart from a few slight errors in the softwareâwhich she immediately mendedâit appeared functional.

She initiated the new system and slaved it with her original system, running them in parallelâone tapping the ONIâs EnglishâCovenant lexicon, the other tapping the alien AIâs

CovenantâEnglish lexicon.

If the alien copying software could duplicate her translation routine, could it duplicate more of her?

No. She squelched that thought. The risk of copying any more âhersâ was too great. There were too many unknowns. And this was, after all, the enemyâs code. There could be booby traps, waiting to be tripped within the complex algorithms.

Besides, copying herself would do nothing to prevent her mental degradation. Those interconnection errors were already presentâ¦and they always would be, despite the number of copies generated.

She remembered the strange fractured speech patterns of the Covenant AI and wondered how many times it had been copied.

Her thoughts were interrupted as the Covenant transmissions became clear. It was suddenly as if she had a new set of eyes and ears to hear them: *Excavation proceeding; new sublayer discovered at six-hundred-meter depth* and *Patrol unable to find the Infidels; returning to base* and *Minor artifacts discovered; rejoice!*

And there was one thing she had missed in her previous analysis of the Covenant communiquÃ©s, a second signal on the carrier wave: They used the same symbols she had used to find the Halo constructâthe symbols that the Master Chief had discovered on the alien artifact on CÃ´te dâAzur.

She hadnât seen the simple dots, bars, squares, and triangles before because the Covenant, naturally, had embellished the clean symbols with their highly decorated calligraphied scripts, and further with their overwrought religious allusions.

Cortana, with her new subsystem and her new translation lexicon, could, as Dr. Halsey might say, âcut through the crap.â

These subcommuniquÃ©s were orders. They originated from new ships entering the Epsilon Eridani system and were, in turn, accepted and acknowledged by those outbound.

It was an automated mail system that could carry messages from the center of the Covenant Empire to the outer reaches of the galaxy. The Covenant were either too arrogant, or too ignorant, to properly encrypt these orders.

Still, Cortana realized that the UNSC had not, until just now, discovered their deceptively simple systemâ¦so who was more ignorant?

There were deployment orders for hundreds of ships: carriers,

destroyers, tendersâa massive fleet. They were to meet at select locations, join up, refuel, gather resources, and then orient for the next Slipspace jump.

Cortana knew how to translate these simple symbols into stellar coordinates.

Thereâa jump to the Lambda Serpentis system to gather tritium gas for their reactors. And thereâanother jump to the Hawking system to meet with three dozen carriers and effect a transfer of Seraph fighters. And thereâ

Cortana halted all her processes. She directed her full intellect to check and recheck her translation matrix a hundred times.

There was no error.

The terminating coordinates for the Covenantâs impending operation was Sol.

The Covenant were headed to Earth.

Section IV
Gambit

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Chapter Twenty-Two

Time: Date Record Anomaly \ Estimated 0640 Hours, September 23, 2552 (Military Calendar) \ Epsilon Eridani System, Tunnel Complex Below Surface of Reach.

John tensed as he watched the thousands of Covenant crowding on the galleries surround him and his team. He didnât dare move; his team was on the wrong end of too much firepower. They couldnât win this fight.

On the third gallery off the floor of the great room, at the four oâclock position, a Hunter pair roared with anger. They raised their fuel rod cannons and then leveled their weaponsâand fired.

Kelly moved before anyone; she was a blur of motion and stepped in front of Dr. Halsey. John and Fred moved to either side of Kelly, while Anton grabbed the Admiral and threw the older man behind them.

The blinding bright-green fuel rods struck the Spartansâ shields and splashed over their chests.

Johnâs shield drained completely. The overpressure forced him to take a step backward, and the skin on his forearms blistered.

Then the heat was gone, and he blinked away the black dots that swarmed in his vision. Kelly lay at his feet. Her armor smoldered and hydrostatic gel boiled from the emergency release vent along her left side.

A thousand more shots rang out from the gallery, and John instinctively crouched to cover his fallen comrade. He braced for the inevitable burning energy impact.

Plasma bolts and crystalline needles crisscrossed the galleries overhead, a spiderweb of energy and projectiles. Every shot was directed at the pair of Hunters who had fired upon John and his team.

The Hunter pair raised their shields in unison and ducked behind themâthe quarter-meter-thick slabs of metal could repel almost any single weaponâs fireâ¦but not this merciless barrage. These mightiest Covenant soldiers burned, their armor and shields ignited as well, and John caught their outlines for only a split second before they were vaporized.

The section of gallery where they had stood blasted into dust

and smoke, and the debris rained onto the floorâ¦along with dozens of Grunts and Jackals who had been unfortunate enough to be standing too near the pair.

Three heartbeats pounded in Johnâs chest. Neither the humans nor the Covenant hosts in the great room moved.

âWhat the hell is this?â Sergeant Johnson muttered. âShouldnât we be dead by now?â

John linked to Kellyâs biomonitors; she was in shock, and her suitâs heat pumps were strained to the failure point. He had to get her to safety.

From the uppermost gallery a Covenant Elite in golden armor raised its energy sword high into the air and shouted. Translation software in Johnâs helmet whispered half a second later: âTake themâbut the next one to fire at the holy light will be skinned alive! Go!â

Dr. Halsey pressed the arm of her glasses tighter against the back of her ear, listening as the built-in translator whispered. âThe crystal,â she murmured. âTheyâre after the crystal.â

Teams of Elites dropped slithering, plasticine ropes, which glowed a ghostly blue. They rappelled to the floor. A hundred Grunts squealed with excitement and danced from one foot to the other. Jackals followed their Elite leaders on the ropes.

âPolaski!â Admiral Whitcomb shouted into his COM. âGet down here ASAP! We need immediate extraction!â

âRoger that,â Polaski replied in her cool never-flinch Navy flier voice.

Fred, Grace, and Anton turned and fired three-round bursts straight up as a team of Elites tried to descend on their position. The Elites fell, spattering purple blood across the tiled floor.

Dr. Halsey stuffed the alien crystal into her lab coat pocket and knelt next to Kelly. She checked her vitals on the data pad and shook her head. She looked at John, her expression grim. âSheâs aliveâ¦barely. She needs help.â

âLetâs not be rude,â Admiral Whitcomb barked. âWelcome our guests, Master Chief!â

âPerimeter fire,â the Master Chief ordered. âKeep it tight. Dispersion pattern Delta. Go!â

The Spartans simultaneously stepped into a semicircle, assault rifles pointed outward. In unison they thumbed their weaponsâ safeties and opened fire. Right behind them Locklear, Johnson,

Haverson, and the Admiral took up position inside the circle. They primed and threw grenades.

John paused and turned his attention to Kelly. He hauled her limp body off the floor and draped her over his shoulder.

The Covenant forces hit the ground and edged closer, but they didnât return fire. Dozens of Elites dropped as armor-piercing rounds peppered their armor and frag grenades detonated with thunderous force. The Jackals who followed their masters on the ropes landed in the middle of the carnage, maneuvered in front of the Elites, and overlapped energy shields. It was typical Elite bravadoâthey had to be the first into the battleâ¦even if that meant theyâd die for that honor.

The Chief had no problem satisfying their honor. He slapped a fresh clip into his rifle and continued firing.

Jackals and Elites cautiously advanced on the firing Spartans. A second line of Jackals angled their personal energy shields over their heads to prevent any grenades from being tossed into their midst.

Polaskiâs dropship descended from the hole in the ceiling, spun about, and eased to a stop a meter above the cracked blue-tiled floor. Both side hatches of the craft hissed open.

John handed Kelly to Fred as he leapt on board; he helped Dr. Halsey and the Admiral inside next. Locklear and the other Spartans jumped into the second hatch. Sergeant Johnson and the Master Chief were last to boardâjust as their feet touched the ramp and they grabbed on to the rungs, Polaski accelerated off the deck.

The Master Chief watched the Covenant as the dropship climbed. There were thousands of themâon the floor, clinging to the walls, overflowing the galleries. They looked like a swarm of angry ants.

The hatch sealed and the Master Chief moved forward, toward the cockpit. As he passed through the compartment, he saw Kelly. She was slumped over; thin trails of smoke curled from the holes in her armor.

He helped Dr. Halsey strap Kelly down. Halseyâs eyes locked onto the wounded Spartanâs erratic vitals as they squiggled across her data pad. She set the elongated crystal next to Kellyâ¦but it didnât lie flat. It defied gravity, floatingâone sharp, slender end pointed at the surface.

âHow very odd,â Halsey whispered.

John had to agree; it was unusual. Almost as odd as being under the guns of a thousand angry Covenant soldiersâyet none of them had fired a shot.

âTake care of her,â he told Dr. Halsey, then he stood and made his way to the cockpit.

Polaski hunched over the controls. She pushed the Covenant dropship into a hyperbolic ascent and entered the hole in the ceiling of the great room. The Master Chief grabbed hold of the walls and braced himself.

The dropship, however, slowed and pitched forward so it was once again horizontal.

âProblem,â Polaski announced and rapidly tapped the controls. â*Big* problem.â

The purple light of the grav beam in the hole darkened; it seemed to fade from viewâ¦but it also began to hurt to look at.

âTheyâre pushing us back,â Admiral Whitcomb said. âLi, crawl topside and launch a couple of Jackhammers up this pipe.â

âYes, sir,â Li repliedâeager to return to the fight. He nodded at John, grabbed a Jackhammer rocket launcher, and moved to the hatch.

The Admiral frowned and shook his head. âNo way a rocket will make it up a kilometer of this tunnel. Gotta try anyway.â

The dropship stopped rising, bobbed in place a moment, and slowly sank back down through the tunnel.

Li opened the side hatch. The intense purple light from the grav beam flooded the interior of the ship.

Dr. Halsey inhaled sharply, and the Master Chief turned to see what had startled her.

For a moment he thought the crystal she had brought with her had shattered. But it hadnât broken, not exactly. The top half of the slender shard had split along its facets and opened like a flower blossom. The sapphire petals undulated, and as the ultraviolet light of the grav beam fell upon them, the crystal opened wider. The facets twirled and spun in a complex geometric dance. The crystal seemed to reshape itself, and it pulsed a cool green.

The light inside the ship clearedâall traces of the purple tint seemed to recede like a tide.

The dropship lurched upward.

âWhat the hellââ Polaski, caught unawares, grasped the yoke and pulled back. Their dropship hummed with power and shot up through the tunnel.

âGravity,â Dr. Halsey whispered and stared into the opened facets of the crystal. âThis thing warped space when we first approached. It apparently has an effect on artificial gravity fields as well. I canât wait to get this into a lab.â

The dropship emerged from the hole, and sunlight flooded the interior.

Once out of the grav beam, the slender stone folded back upon itself, closing petal-like fragments, melding back into a single smooth shard. Dr. Halsey plucked up the stone and slipped it back into her lab coat pocket; she returned her attention to Kellyâs biosigns.

The air over Menachite Mountain was thick with circling flocks of Banshee fliers and Seraph fighters. The three-hundred-meter-long light cruiser had company, too. Six more Covenant cruisers faced their tiny dropship, plasma turrets tracking them.

A series of icons flashed on Polaskiâs console. âTheyâve got weapons lock,â she said, the calm in her voice cracking slightly around the edges.

âThey wonât fire,â Admiral Whitcomb declared. There was steel resolution in his wordsâas if this werenât a guess on his part, but rather an order that the Covenant had better follow. He set his hands on his hips and watched the ships, seeming to stare the cruisers down. âThey want whatever the doctor and her team discoveredâ¦and they want it bad enough to let us shoot at them and not so much as spit in our direction.â

âSir,â the Master Chief said. âWeâre to rendezvous with Cortana and the captured flagship at oh-seven-fifteen hours. That gives us only twenty minutes, sir.â

Admiral Whitcomb consulted his watch and then glanced at the Covenant ships gathering around them and edging closer. âPolaski, get us out of here. Plot a course to your rendezvous pointâand make this crate fly as fast as you can!â

âAye aye, sir.â Polaski angled the ship into the upper atmosphere of Reach; the sky darkened from turquoise to slate gray to midnight blue and then inky black, filled with stars.

As their dropship left the cruisers behind, it moved painfully slow compared to the agile Seraph fighters. They formed up

around her, four to the port and four on the starboard of their craft. A pair of the teardrop-shaped singleships pulled ahead of her, slowedâ¦and blocked their path.

âTheyâre boxing us in,â Polaski said and decelerated their ship.

âWarrant Officer,â the Admiral said and set a hand gently on her shoulder. âRam them. Full speed.â

Polaski swallowed. âAye, sir.â One of her hands cinched her crash harness tight. The other hand passed over the velocity stripe on the control panel, and shoved it to full power.

The dropship jumpedâstraight toward the Seraph fighters in their path. The two fighters tumbled aside with a scant three meters to spare, and the dropship raced past them.

Locklear peered out of the port display and whistled. âDoes anyone else,â he whispered, âthink itâs a little crowded up here? â

The Master Chief looked over Locklearâs shoulder. There had been a dozen small warships when they had descended only a few hours agoâ¦now there were three times that number in orbit around Reach.

There were light cruisers that looked like luminous manta rays; there were four carriers with their bulbous sections, and the space near them was aglow with swarms of Seraph single-craft; there were a handful of destroyers, sleek and fast, bristling with plasma turrets.

There was also wreckage: Pieces of Covenant ships tumbled in orbit, raw ragged chunks of the alloy plating, tangles of plasma conduits still aglow from the heat they carried, and clouds of metal that had been vaporized and had cooled into mists of glittering dust.

âCortanaâs been busy in our absence,â Lieutenant Haverson remarked. He nodded approvingly at the carnage.

The Master Chief detected flickers of light and dark from the launch bays of a Covenant carrier. He activated his visorâs magnification and saw a legion of Elites in thruster packs, and a score of the tentacled engineering drones leaving the bay.

âSingleships, drones, and Elite boarding parties on intercept vectors,â Polaski announced. âInboundââ She paused and double-checked her scans. âJesus. Theyâre inbound from all directions.â

âGet us to the rendezvous coordinates,â Admiral Whitcomb ordered. âAnd donât spare the horses.â

âSir,â Polaski replied, her voice icy cold, âthese *are* the rendezvous coordinates.â

The Master Chief searched for their captured ship on any displayâand saw only the enemy.

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Cortana and *Ascendant Justice* reappeared in space; it was a tight fit.

This particular jump required precision to the centimeter and, although she loathed admitting it, a large measure of luck.

She had often wondered what would happen if a ship transitioned to normal space too close to a planet or other massâin this case, another ship.

Ascendant Justice winked into existence within the debris field in high orbit around Reach. There was, however, no ultra-violent explosion as the atoms of the flagship overlapped with the matter of the scrapped ships the Covenant had herded together in space.

Either Slipspace jumps prevented such occurrences from happening, shunting the incoming ship to the side like water that flows around a river rockâ¦or she had borrowed some of the Master Chiefâs probability-bending good fortune.

Hundreds of wrecked ships, human and Covenant alike, tumbled lifelessly about her, their net trajectories suggesting that *Ascendant Justice* had just nudged them aside. If sheâd had more time, she wouldâve designed a set of experiments with drone ships to test out her displacementâluck hypothesis.

But time was something neither she nor the Master Chief had in abundance.

Minutes remained until their rendezvousâand Cortana would need every millisecond to accomplish what she had to do if any of them were going to leave the Epsilon Eridani system alive.

Cortana searched the field of derelicts for a likely candidate. There were only a handful of Covenant ships; if the UNSC had managed to take out one of the alien ships in the battle for Reach, they apparently had been forced to obliterate it. No suitable candidates remained for her plan.

She turned her attention to the vast number of wrecked UNSC

ships. The Covenant didnât have to completely destroy a human ship to remove its tactical presence from the battleâa single energy projection beam could tear through enough decks and kill enough crew to disable the craft.

She wondered how many fallen humans drifted in the local space alongside her, thousands of brave men and women who had died fighting.

Her sensors flicked over the silhouettes of the UNSC light ships. There were corvettes with bisected hulls leaking radioactive coolant from their nuclear start-up reactors. Although they were more suitable for her purpose, the damage to them was too great. She didnât find one with a single intact fusion reactor.

She tagged the location of the carriers and heavy cruisers and excluded them from her search. They were simply too large. She was willing to sacrifice maneuverability and speedâ¦but not so much that it would take her an hour to make the burn out of orbit.

That left destroyers and frigates. She found and tagged fourteen in the debris field. Though visibly distinct, destroyers were essentially frigates that carried a meter and a half of Titanium-A armor instead of the sixty centimeters of their lighter counterparts.

There were two candidates: Both the destroyer *Tharsis* and the frigate *Gettysburg* had intact fusion reactors. While the *Gettysburg* had been killed by an energy projector beam that had gutted it stem to sternâobliterating the bridge and life supportâits power plant and even the Magnetic Accelerator Cannon on its undercarriage were apparently functional. Even better: The shipâs topside hardpoints were intact.

Cortana let a flicker of power pulse through *Ascendant Justice*âs engines, and she slowly drifted toward the *Gettysburg*.

She paused to listen to the Covenant traffic in-system. There was eight times the chatter there had been before, with many references to the âInfidelsâ on the planet and the âholy lightâ that was now in jeopardy. Good. That meant the Master Chief was doing what he did best: causing mayhem among the enemy. And more importantly, the presence of *Ascendant Justice* floating among the hundreds of dead ships had not been detected.

When she was within a kilometer of the *Gettysburg*, she cut

her engines. With delicate puffs from the thrusters she edged closer and rolled *Ascendant Justice* until its top side was parallel with the top side of the *Gettysburg*.

She pinged the *Gettysburg*âs telemetry system and received a faint handshake reply. Cortana gave the override codeâquickly acceptedâand entered the *Gettysburg*âs NAV computer.

There was no other computer intelligence on board. The captain of the *Gettysburg* had flatlined the NAV system and the AI as per the Cole Protocol. Cortana extended her presence through the empty systems. The *Gettysburg* was a wreck; all thrusters offline. It wouldnât be moving on its own power ever again, but its heart still beat. The shipâs fusion reactor operated at 67 percent capacity. Perfect.

Ascendant Justice gently touched down on the *Gettysburg*âprobably the first time in the history of the universe that human and Covenant ships had made contact with nonlethal intentions.

All modern UNSC ships had been designed with hardpoints on their dorsal and ventral sides in the event that they were too crippled to move under their own power. In theory, another UNSC ship could dock, lock systems, and carry the wounded ship away.

The Covenant flagship had a similar series of hardpoints on its top side where ships too large to fit in its launch bay could dock.

The two systems, however, were incompatible.

Cortana fixed that. She activated the seven service drones on the *Gettysburg*, and instructed the Covenant Engineers within the outer hull of *Ascendant Justice* to secure the docking points mating the two ships and adapt their power uplinks.

The reason for this salvage operation, her pinpoint jump into the debris field, and the hybrid dockingâ¦it was all for power.

*Ascendant Justice*âs cover had been blown; the Covenant knew that their flagship was human-controlled. That made their original plan of rendezvousing in orbit around Reach impossible. She could have jumped to that location and picked up the Chief, but then they would be stranded there while the Slipspace capacitors slowly rechargedâand in the meantime they would be boxed in and obliterated by the Covenant armada.

So she had to change tactics; sheâd jump into the thick of a

hostile and wary Covenant force, grab the Chief, and just as quickly jump out of the system. For that sheâd need power to instantly recharge the Slipspace capacitorsâthe kind of power only *two* ships could produce.

The power uplinks connected. Gigawatts flowed from the *Gettysburg*âs reactor into *Ascendant Justice*âs energy grid.

âPerfect,â she purred.

It was 0712 hours. She had less than three minutes to prepare for the next phase of her plan.

Cortana checked and rechecked the calculations for what had to be the shortest Slipspace jump ever: from the floating junkyard to the rendezvous coordinates, a mere three thousand kilometers. She scanned that region of spaceâand discovered it was no longer a blind spot in the Covenant defenses. There were three times as many ships in-system as when sheâd left.

Cortana spotted the Chiefâs hijacked dropship ascending from the lower atmosphere of Reach, with a pack of Seraph fighters surrounding the craft.

She intercepted a series of repeated orders from the Covenantâs fleet commander: *Do not fire or* you *will be targeted and destroyed. The Infidels have captured the holy light.*

This was both good and bad. Good because the Master Chief and his team with this âholy lightâ avoided being blasted into vapor. Bad because every Covenant ship in the system was closing in on their dropshipâultimately theyâd box it in, grapple with the tiny craft, and take it with overwhelming force.

This also made Cortanaâs jump target increasingly crowded.

She made certain her plasma turrets were fully charged; she rechecked her shaping magnetic coils; she ran a systems check on *Ascendant Justice*âs thrusters in case something happened with her exit jump and she had to maneuver.

The time was 0714.10 Military Standard.

Cortana then did the one thing she was not good at: wait. Fifty seconds for a mind that could perform a trillion calculations per second was an eternity.

At T minus thirty seconds Cortana dumped power into the Slipspace capacitors.

Pinpricks of light dotted the black space around her.

At T minus twenty she updated her calculations, taking into account the slight gravitational variances that so many Covenant

warships created in local space.

The vacuum around her pulled apart, and she picked a path through the âhereâ of normal space into the ânot-hereâ of Slipspace.

At T minus ten she wrote a quick program to target the distant ships near her exit coordinatesâand keep them targeted when she reappeared.

Ascendant Justice moved slightly forward into the rip in space; light enveloped the craft.

She vanished from the field of floating debris andâ

âreappeared in an eyeblink. The full face of Reach filling her lateral starboard displays. The port displays were crowded with inbound Covenant ships.

The odd piggybacked Covenantâhuman craft appearing in the middle of their trap must have confused the enemyâ¦no one fired.

The dropship was three kilometers off Cortanaâs starboard beam, its trajectory more or less aligned with *Ascendant Justice*âs launch bay.

She opened the UNSC E-band and said, âChief, your ride is here.â

âAcknowledged,â the Master Chief replied. There was no quaver in his rock-solid voice. He had been headed into certain death a moment ago, but he sounded like this was what he expected to occur. Like this was normal operating procedure.

The dropship veered toward the open bay, and Cortana dropped shields for a split secondâjust long enough for the tiny craft to enterâthen reestablished the protective field.

Cortana routed power from the *Gettysburg* into *Ascendant Justice*âs Slipspace capacitors, and they began soaking up the charge.

Three dozen Covenant cruisers surrounded her, their plasma turrets glowing a hellish red as they prepared to fire.

Apparently the order not to fire did not extend to *Ascendant Justice*.

Cortana needed five seconds to attain a full charge, five seconds before she could make good her escapeâ¦but five seconds might be long enough for her to become the center of a small Covenant-made sun.

She took the initiative and fired at the closest four cruisers.

Laser-fine plasma lanced from her turrets, burned though the Covenant shields, and split open their hulls. When the superheated gas came in contact with the atmosphere inside the ships, plastic, flesh, and metal caught fire and roiled throughout their interiors.

Two of the targeted cruisers immediately detonated as the plasma beams found the reactors. Billowing clouds of vaporized metal mushroomed across the night and obscured her from the advancing ships.

Pinpricks of light appeared around *Ascendant Justice*.

ERROR.

Cortana rechecked the figures and quickly found the source of the problem: The fail-safe subroutine that tracked local gravitational conditions returned an anomaly.

The gravity from Reach no longer warped spaceâ¦which was impossible.

No time for speculation. She had to leave or fight.

She moved *Ascendant Justice* into the twisting spatial fieldâ

âand vanished.

Instead of the nonvisible nondimensions of Slipspace, however, a blue-tinged field appeared on Cortanaâs monitors. It wasnât spaceânot the crowded space near Reach, or the star-filled space of the Epsilon Eridani system. But it was a space, where there should have been no space at all.

She probed the region with her sensors, but her range was limited to a thousand kilometers as if she were in an obscuring fog.

Thereâa contact. And another. And then a dozen more.

Fourteen Covenant cruisers resolved from the blue mist.

âCortana,â the Master Chief said. *âWhatâs our status?â*

âSame as ever,â Cortana replied. âWeâre in trouble.â

The Covenant warships fired.

âDamn,â Cortana muttered.

She initiated her last option: She fired back, hoping to take some of them to hell with her.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Time: Date Record [[Error]] Anomaly \ Date Unknown \ Aboard Hybrid Vessel *GettysburgâAscendant Justice*, In Slipspace. Now.

âCortana?â the Master Chief asked. âWhatâs our status?â

The Chief and the rest of his team scrambled out of the Covenant dropship. Fred carried a semiconscious Kelly out and laid her on the deck of the launch bay.

âSame as ever,â Cortana replied. âWeâre in trouble.â

Video feed from the shipâs external cameras appeared on the Master Chiefâs heads-up display. Covenant cruisers surrounded them, their plasma turrets aglow; they reminded the Chief of pictures he had seen of fish that lived at the bottom of Earthâs oceansâswarms of phosphorescing lights and razor-sharp teeth.

He marched toward the edge of the launch bay and stood a centimeter from where the shipâs energy shield abutted the opening to the space beyond. He looked directly into the vast blue fields and the giant warships far too close for his liking.

âWe jumped to Slipspace, didnât we?â Lieutenant Haverson asked uncertainly.

âYes,â Dr. Halsey replied. âAnd no.â

She withdrew the crystal from her lab coat pocket and frowned as she discovered that it was no longer a slender shard. The facets had rearranged like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzleâ¦but in a configuration that differed from the one the artifact displayed in the Covenant grav beam. This time it was a starburst of edges and refracted light.

âWe jumped,â she said, examining her reflection in the artifactâs mirrored planes. âBut not to the Slipspace we know.â

The Master Chiefâs radiation counter clicked and a shrill alarm screamed through his helmet.

âSecure that, Anton,â he said and nodded toward the glowing stone. âGet it into the reactor compartment of the Longsword.â

Anton relieved the crystal from Dr. Halsey, who only reluctantly released it from her grasp. He sprinted toward the wrecked Longsword.

âThere was a radiation surge, Doctor,â the Chief explained. âAnd that thing is the source.â The Chief noticed that the intensity of the radiation did not drop off as Anton moved into the Longsword.

âWhatever it is,â Dr. Halsey said as she scrutinized the blue field outside their ship, âit warps space. When we first approached it in the great room, space curled around the crystal. And again in the grav beam, it dispersed that field potential.â

âAnd now?â Admiral Whitcomb asked. âThis thing is affecting our passage through Slipspace?â

âApparently so,â Dr. Halsey said, and stepped next to John to get a better look outside.

The Admiral joined her and watched as the Covenant shipsâ turrets heated. âCan they even fire those things in Slipspace? If they can, weâre sitting ducks.â

The Master Chief could make out more ships in the distance. The Covenant vessels flickered, faded, disappeared, and then reappeared in the fog. The nearest enemy Covenant ships fired. Amorphous balls of superheated gas belched from their turrets and accelerated toward them, tingeing the blue space purple.

The Master Chief saw Locklear as he helped Polaski out of the Covenant dropship. He kept her hand in his, and they watched together as the plasma sped toward them.

The balls of plasma streaked onâthen curled and spiraled off their trajectories. Several simply winked out of existence, only to reappear somewhere else. The enemy shots raced up, down, sidewaysâany direction but toward *Ascendant Justice*.

âWhat the hell is this?â Sergeant Johnson said and he stepped next to the Master Chief to watch the display. âI didnât think their ships could fire in Slipspace. Ours sure as hell canât.â

Dr. Halsey removed her glasses, and her eyes widened. âNormally, they canât. If they can fire, then logically, weâre not in Slipspace. And wherever we are,â she murmured, âthe rules have changed.â

The Admiral frowned. âCortana,â he shouted. âWhatever you do, do not returnââ

Too late. Cortana returned fire.

Columns of fire streaked from *Ascendant Justice*âstreamers that twisted and helixed, then vanished and reappeared.

The bubble of tangled blue space containing *Ascendant Justice*

and the Covenant warships now contained at least forty bolts of superheated plasma circling in random directions and accelerated to incalculable velocities.

Three spheres of roiling fire appeared in front of the nearest Covenant cruiser and splashed across its bow. The first boiled away its shimmering silver shield; the second and third melted the armor and alloy skin beneath. Atmosphere vented and spun the massive ship like a childâs pinwheel.

âHot damn,â Sergeant Johnson crowed. âAll we have to do is wait for those trigger-happy bastards to take themselves out. Look, theyâre firing again.â

The Covenant weapons heated and squeezed out a second salvo of plasma. The guided bolts of fire veered off course, swarmed, disappeared, reappeared, and spun out of control though the localized Slipspace bubble.

âNo, Sergeant,â Dr. Halsey said, her voice turning cold. âWeâre all in the same mess.â

âCortana,â the Master Chief said, âdrop the launch bay blast door. Now!â

The three-meter-thick door overhead shuddered and slid down.

A streamer of plasma on a parallel trajectory flashed through the dark not half a kilometer from the Master Chiefâs faceâso close that the external temperature rose twenty degrees even through the shipâs shields.

Red fire illuminated *Ascendant Justice*âs starboard shield as plasma splashed across them; the film separating the launch bay from the external vacuum rippled like a thousand broken mirrors. Static crackled across the Master Chiefâs armor, and his shields resonated in sympathy.

As the blast door lowered, the Chief saw another fireball spill across their port side. Energy sprayed across the bow in a bloodred borealis. *Ascendant Justice*âs shields flickered and fadedâ¦but they held. Barely.

The launch bay door touched the deck and sealed with a subsonic *thud*.

âBlast door locked and secured,â Cortana announced.

âLetâs get this boat under way,â Admiral Whitcomb barked. âWhile we still have a boat.â He looked around and frowned. âChief, lead the way to the bridge.â

âYes, sir.â He marched to the passage that led deeper into the alien ship. His Spartans and the rest of the crew followed.

Admiral Whitcomb turned to Dr. Halsey. âCatherine, explain in laymanâs terms just what the hell is going on here. If we can see those cruisers and they can see us, why arenât our shots connecting?â

Ascendant Justice rolled to port, and explosions chained overhead. The artificial gravity fluttered, and the deck tilted. The crew stumbled, and Dr. Halsey fell to the deck.

âTurrets one and seven destroyed,â Cortana announced.

Whitcomb helped Dr. Halsey up off her knees. She glanced nervously up and down the passage. âIâd guess the alien artifact weâve brought with us into Slipspace has expanded the region. Physicists believe Slipstream space is a highly compressed version of normal space, layered over and under itself, like a ball of yarn. Now, imagine that *our* ball of yarnââshe interlaced her fingersââis looped and knotted. These threads are not solid, however; plasma, light, and matter jump from one thread to another given the slightest quantum fluctuation.â

âIf thatâs the case, Doctor,â Lieutenant Haverson said, âthen what about our ship? Why arenât we tangled and spread along a trillion alternate spatial pathways?â

âBecause of the mass of this ship.â She pushed her glasses higher onto her nose. âImagine a rumpled sheet that represents this space. If you set a heavy mass upon that sheet, it draws it taut, smooths it out.â

The Chief came to the heavy bulkhead door and held up his hand, telling the rest of them to halt. He opened the door and stepped onto the bridge, sweeping the space with his rifle. âClear,â he told them.

Admiral Whitcomb and the others entered the bridge. Lieutenant Haverson stepped onto the raised platform and said, âCortana, project tactical on the displays.â

Enemy ship positions and plasma tracks appeared on the interior walls. Contacts multiplied and coalesced, making the plasma appear like waves sloshing about in a bowl. Another bolt broke across the prow of *Ascendant Justice*.

Through the deck the Master Chief felt the successive thumps of explosive decompressions.

âHit on subengineering decks,â Cortana said. âSealing those

regions. Fire in the lower levels. Attempting to isolate and pump out the atmosphere.â

Johnâs childhood AI teacher, DÃ©jÃ , had taught the Spartans about the great Naval battles on Earthâs oceans before humans traveled to the stars. They had studied victories in the Punic Wars, and at Midway, as well as the disastrous defeat of Xerxes by the Athenian Navy. DÃ©jÃ had told them, however, that one thing was greater than any human enemy on the sea: nature. Tidal waves and typhoons could crush the mightiest of battleshipsâ¦and ignored the tactics of the most brilliant captain.

Ascendant Justice was in the center of a sea of fireâ¦and it was being battered apart.

Thunder ripped through *Ascendant Justice*âs hull; a geyser of flames shot out the passageway to the bridge. The air jumped and hissed as it escaped the pressurized chamber.

The bulkhead door slammed shut, and the air stilled.

Sergeant Johnson shook his head clear from the sudden drop in pressure. âLetâs drop out of this mixed-up Slipspace and start fighting.â

âYeah, or just get rid of that crystal,â Locklear said. âIf itâs the cause of all this mess.â He drew his pistol. âOne round and *boom*! Problem solved.â

âDonât do that!â Dr. Halsey snapped. âA drop back to normal space has us facing a dozen or more cruisers. And if you destroy the crystal, the expanded Slipspace bubble weâre in would instantly collapse. Every separate mass in the bubble will compact into a single mass. We wouldnât survive the transition.â

Worry creased Admiral Whitcombâs features. âThat leaves just one option. Cortana, give me flank speed and heat up every weapon we have. Weâre going to run right over these Covenant ships. Tangled space or not, weâre going to blast them right back to normal space from point-blank range.â

âYes, Admiral,â Cortana said. âEngines answering flank speed.â

A dull *thump* echoed from the aft section.

âStand by,â Cortana said. âThereâs a problem with the primary enginesâa power drop occurred just as I engaged.â

On the bridge displays the external cameras turned and focused on the aft hull of *Ascendant Justice*. A snakelike plasma conduit came into focus. Cortana adjusted the image, and a

three-meter-wide hole in the conduit snapped into view. Streamers of blue-white gas vented from the breach.

âThatâs our main drive conduit,â Cortana said. âItâs taken a hit. Iâm shutting down engines to conserve power.â

The Master Chief squinted. âThat was no plasma hit,â he muttered. âIt was too precise and too inconvenientâthis had to be sabotage.â

Admiral Whitcomb scowled. âChief, take your team and prepare for a zero-gee repair of the plasma conduit.â

âYes, sir.â

Polaski stepped forward. âIâll go too, sir,â she said. Locklear grasped her by the arm and tried to pull her back, but she shrugged his hand off. âI can pilot the dropshipâget the Spartan team in and out faster.â

The Admiral narrowed his eyes, assessing the young woman. âVery well, Warrant Officer.â He added so softly that the Chief almost missed it: *âToo many damned heroes in this war.â*

Polaski turned to Locklear, handed him back his bandanna, and whispered, âHang on to that for me, Corporal. Iâll pick it up when I get back.â

Locklearâs hand clenched, then relaxed. He took the token, nodded, and looked away. âIâll be here,â he said and tied it around his arm.

âChief,â Admiral Whitcomb said. âMake sure you come back alive. Thatâs an order, son.â

Chapter Twenty-Four

Time: Date Record [[Error]] Anomaly \ Date Unknown \ Captured Covenant Dropship Near Hybrid Vessel *GettysburgâAscendant Justice,* In Anomalous Slipspace Bubble.

The faintly blue luminous walls of the Covenant dropship pressed in, which made John feel slightly claustrophobic. It was ironic when he stopped to think about it, because he was always inside his skintight armor. His fellow Spartans sat in the bay beside him, motionless.

Fred, designated Blue-Two on this mission, was Johnâs second in command. He had fought in more than 120 campaigns, was a great leader and a quick thinker. Sometimes he took the responsibility of his command too seriously, though, empathizing too deeply with any wounded member of his team.

Li, Blue-Three, was the teamâs zero-gee combat specialist. He had trained extensively with microgravity equipment and martial arts at the UNSCâs extreme-conditions facility on Chiron in orbit about Mars. He was as much at home in free fall as the rest of them were on solid land, and John was glad to have him on this mission.

Anton, Blue-Four, had John worried. He spent most of his life with his feet firmly planted on the ground. Heâd cross-trained in tracking, camouflage, and stealth, and had been used almost exclusively on ground-based operations. More than once he had expressed discomfort in zero-gee situations.

Will, Blue-Five, was quiet, but had never failed to complete his mission. He wasnât always that way, though. When he was younger he was the one with the jokes and riddles that kept the teamâs spirits high. Something had hardened in him over the yearsâ¦as it had in them all. But with Will something special had been lost.

Grace, Blue-Six, had a knack for explosives. She could shape a charge to cut through a single steel bolt with only a whisper sound, or rig a hundred thousand liters of kerosene to blow into a firestorm from hell. Ironically her temper was nonexistent.

John opened a COM channel. âGive me a systems check, Blue Team.â

Five acknowledgment lights winked on.

âThis reminds me of the underwater mission Chief Mendez sent us on at Emerald Cove,â Fred whispered. âWhen he sabotaged half our air tanks? And we ended up stealing his.â

âAnd after,â Anton said, laughing, âwe ditched him and camped on that island. It was a week with nothing to do but light bonfires, bake clams, and surf.â

âMmmmm,â Grace added, âcalamari.â

John wondered if Emerald Cove even existed anymore. The UNSC had abandoned that colony a decade ago. The Covenant had most likely glassed that world.

âBlue Team.â Polaskiâs voice broke over the COM. *âLocal conditions are as calm as theyâre going to get. Exiting in threeâ¦twoâ¦*one.â

John felt the acceleration in the pit of his stomach. He rose, moved to the hatch, and popped it open. Outside, *Ascendant Justice*âs hull moved past themâalmost every square centimeter of the flagshipâs polished alloy skin had been scarred by heat and micrometeors; tendrils of metal vapor snaked and shimmered in the vacuum.

On *Ascendant Justice*âs upper deck he saw the looming shadow of the inverted UNSC frigate *Gettysburg* still miraculously attached. It was on fire, pockmarked with craters, and venting atmosphere, but it was remarkably intact. If not for the thousands of dead Naval personnel undoubtedly on board, he might have christened the ship âlucky.â

The dropship slowed and Polaski drifted, turned, and descended onto the surface of the ship.

âLatch engaged,â she said over the COM. *âAll yours, Chief.â*

âFred, Grace, and I will reconnoiter,â he told Blue Team. âAnton, Will, and Li, get ready to move the arc welder and hull plates we scavenged from the *Gettysburg* when we give the *all-clear* signal.â

John eased his boots onto the hull. Their magnetic soles clamped onto the metal with a satisfying *click*.

Polaski had landed the Covenant dropship so that its mandibles cradled the hole and gave them some shelter.

Overhead, Slipspace was on fire. It looked as if someone had

doused the night with jet fuel and ignited it. Bloody, boiling streaks of flame tore across a midnight-blue sky. Meteors flashed past and sprayed molten metal in trails of glittering stardust.

A fist-sized projectile blurred past the Master Chief and rammed into the shipâs starboard side. Sparks and liquefied alloy spattered into space. His shields flickered as debris ricocheted from the armorâs protective field.

They had to move fast. The Admiral was right: This was a shooting gallery. The quicker they sealed that hole and got out of hereâthe better.

John turned and swept his rifle over the terrain. There were bumpy sensor nodes, kilometers of conduits, and a dozen gaping canyons in the hull. A legion of Covenant warriors could hide in this mess.

No enemy contact. Nothing on his motion sensors, either.

He stepped close to the main-drive conduit and examined the hole. The pipe was five meters across and still red hot, even though Cortana had shut it down three minutes ago. The hole was round, a three-meter-wide gap, with ragged edges that all pointed inward.

âIf that was from a plasma strike,â Grace said, âthe metal would have been boiled away. If it was from an impact, the edges would be scraped on one side, compacted on the other. This hole was deliberately made.â

âEyes sharp,â John said. âWe have company. My guess is camouflaged Elites. Maybe some of the original crew still alive. Blue-Three, - Four, and - Fiveâmove out.â

âRoger,â Will replied.

Anton emerged from the dropship hefting an arc welder, while Will and Li maneuvered the three-by-three-meter hull plates.

âFred and Grace, youâre on the welders,â John ordered. âAnton, post on top of the dropship. Li, youâre at three oâclock. Will at nine. Iâll take the six.â

Blue acknowledgment lights winked on.

John helped Fred and Grace set the plates in position. Grace and Fred fired up the arc welder, and pinpoints of metal liquefied beneath their tips. A shower of sparks swirled around them in the evacuated environment like a swarm of fireflies.

âWeâre in position, Admiral,â John reported. âETA for repairs

is two minutes.â

âRoger, Chief,â Admiral Whitcomb replied. Ionization made the channel flood with static. *âWhen youâre done, give the word and get secure. Weâll be accelerating immediately.â*

âYes, sir.â

So far, so good, John thought. *Just another minute or two.*

A streamer of plasma appeared from nowhere. The tangled, crisscrossed Slipspace around them dropped the bolt of boiling fire fifty meters overhead; it moved port to starboardâand vanished back into the void.

The COM shattered into white noise, and the motion sensors blurredâ¦as did the active camouflage shielding of the six Elites who had been slowlyâand until a moment ago imperceptiblyâcrawling toward their position.

âEnemy contacts!â John shouted.

He crouched behind the dome of a sensor node and opened fire. A hail of bullets caught the closest Elite dead-center in its chest. The gunfire punched through its shielding and then tore into its armor. It tumbled backward and spun off the hull.

In his peripheral vision John saw the silent muzzle flashes from his team. He glanced back; Fred and Grace hadnât moved. They stared at the beads of molten alloy under their arc welderâs tip.

As if Fred could read his mind, he said, âI need another twenty seconds, Chief.â

A volley of crystalline needles fired from one of the Elites peppered the sensor node. The Master Chief returned fire, but the Eliteâs camouflage kicked in and it faded from view.

Another plasma bolt sizzled close to the hull, this one thirty meters to port. It was a river of fire that lit the surface of *Ascendant Justice* like a dozen suns. Johnâs shields drained to a quarter.

âOkay, Chief,â Fred told him, âIâmââ

âIncoming!â Polaski cried over the COM.

John turned to the dropship and saw a third plasma projectile materialize from the folds of tangled Slipspace. This one skimmed a mere three meters over the hullâstraight toward them.

Will dived into the crux where the dropship met the hull. Fred and Grace hit the deck. Li stood his ground and fired at the

Elites, muzzle flash reflected in his helmetâs faceplate. Anton rose from his limited cover on top of the dropship, but instinctively ducked again as an Elite took a shot at him. John crouched, jumped, and propelled himself into the sheltered area between the dropshipâs mandibles.

The plasma blasted over the dropship like a tidal wave of fire.

Polaski screamed, and her channel went silent.

Blue-white light filled Johnâs vision, and electrical discharges jolted his flesh and buzzed through his muscles and ligaments. Temperature warnings blared. Boiling hydrostatic gel vented through his MJOLNIR armorâs emergency ducts.

Through blurry eyes, John saw the Covenant Elites flash vaporize. Downship, *Ascendant Justice*âs hull heated to a glowing yellow and softened.

Then the light and heat vanished, and the torrent of fire trailed aft like the tail of a comet.

John craned his neck up, every muscle in his body screaming in pain. There was no trace of Li or Anton. The dropshipâs hull was melted and distorted like a wax candle caught in a blowtorchâs blast.

The cockpit and Polaski were gone.

His biosign warning blared. Will, Grace, and Fred lay next to himâdead or unconscious, he couldnât tell. He quickly attached their tethers to the deck, then clipped his own in place.

John keyed the COM. âAdmiral, conduit breach is sealed, sir.â

âHang on, son,â Admiral Whitcomb replied. *âThis might be a rough ride.â*

John slumped to the deck unconscious.

Chapter Twenty-Five

**Time: Date Record [[Error]] Anomaly \ Date Unknown \
Hybrid Vessel *GettysburgâAscendant Justice*,
In Anomalous Slipspace Bubble.**

Admiral Whitcomb stood on the bridge of *Ascendant Justice*. He gripped the edges of the railing that encircled the central raised platform and watched the sea of fire on the wall displays.

They were stuck in this pocket of Slipspace, trapped like an insect in amber as lines of plasma crisscrossed the region. Enemy fire vanished and reappeared, smearing the blue fog of Slipspace with crimson streaks of glowing energy. Molten chunks of metal, the broken pieces of Covenant ships, streaked past the camerasâcomets that thudded into their hull.

There was another danger in the blue fog: ghost ships that appeared and faded from sightâ¦more than half of them disabled, engulfed in fire, or their hulls broken. How many of those Covenant craft were still capable of engaging *Ascendant Justice*? How many could they take out before they risked the jump back to normal space?

Lieutenant Haverson stood next to him. The young man was invaluable for his tactical assessments and knowledge of the Covenant. He was a bit too cautious for Whitcombâs tasteâthough the trait was to be expected in an ONI officer, he supposed. Still, the young Lieutenant had shown enough backbone to stand up to him. The kid definitely had some potential.

A square on the holographic controls morphed into the tiny figure of Cortana.

âSporadic plasma and mass impacts along our hull, Admiral,â she reported and crossed her arms. âAtmospheric integrity down to thirteen percent. Structural integrity rated poor. I estimate the hull will fail in no more than five minutes.â

âUnderstood,â the Admiral replied.

They didnât have much choice but to play the hand that theyâd been dealt. The longer they stayed in this environment, the more damage the Covenant ships surrounding them incurred.

If *Ascendant Justice* had engines, the Admiral could accelerate that process. But if they waited too long, their own ship would disintegrate around them.

Admiral Whitcomb glanced up to see how the rest of his crew was holding up under the pressure.

Locklear paced, his hands flexing. The ODST was a weapon with its safety permanently clicked offâ¦and on overload charge.

Sergeant Johnson stood near the sealed bulkhead, rifle slung over his shoulder. He was looking at the crew and probably formulating his own opinions about them. He was rock-solid. One glance into his dark eyes and the Admiral understood what drove the man: pure cold hatred of the enemy. The Admiral could appreciate that.

Dr. Halsey tended the Spartan called âKellyâ on the deck. The doctor was brilliantâ¦but a total mystery to him. They had met half a dozen times before at upper-echelon social gatherings, and heâd found her to be charming and outwardly likable. But heâd read enough reports of her âprojectsâ that heâd found it impossible to relate to her. If half the rumors heâd heard about her were true, sheâd been mixed up in every black op from here to Andromeda. He didnât trust her.

âDoctor Halsey,â the Admiral said. He released his grip on the railing and clasped his hands behind his back to conceal his sweaty palms. âClear my bridge of the wounded, ASAP.â

Dr. Halsey looked up from her data pad and the fluctuating patterns of Kellyâs biosigns. âAdmiral, I donât want to move her. She not entirely stable.â

âDo it, Doctor. Sheâs a distraction. We have a battle to fight here.â

Dr. Halsey shot him a look that could have stopped a plasma bolt dead in its tracks.

Lieutenant Haverson stepped forward and cleared his throat. âMaâam, thereâs an escape craft just off the bridge.â He moved to the starboard hatch and eased it open. He drew his pistol and checked the passage beyond. âItâs clear. Locklear, Sergeant, please give the doctor a hand with her patient.â

âYes, sir,â Locklear said. âHappy to sit this battle out in the escape pod.â

Sergeant Johnson set his rifle on Kellyâs chest and said, âCome on, Corporal, shake a leg and gimme a hand. The lady in

her armor weighs more than your last date.â

Locklear and the Sergeant hefted Kelly and, grunting under the load, moved her off the bridge. Dr. Halsey followed, cast one last withering look at the Admiral, and sealed the hatch behind her.

Admiral Whitcomb sighed. He felt for the Spartanâ¦felt too muchâwhich was the problem. He couldnât concentrate with her so close. Heâd want constant status reports on her condition. Hell, he would have gone over, knelt next to her, and held her hand if that wouldâve helped. He loved the men and women under his command as if they were his own sons and daughters. It was the old axiom of command: To be a good leader, you had to love the service. To be a great commander, you had to be willing to destroy that which you loved.

Static crackled, and the Master Chief reported in: *âWeâre in position, Admiral. ETA for repairs is two minutes.â*

âRoger, Chief,â Admiral Whitcomb replied. âWhen youâre done give the word and get secure. Weâll be accelerating immediately.â

âYes, sir.â

Thunder rumbled through the deck.

âPlasma impacts, sir,â Cortana explained. âTheir energy profile has diffused, but they were still powerful enough to knock the lateral sensors and cameras offline.â

Admiral Whitcomb smoothed his thick fingers over his mustache. âWeâve got only a few minutes before this space tears us apart.â He squinted at the wall displays, trying to count the number of enemy craft. âThatâs if those Covenant ships donât do the job first.â

He turned to Cortana. âHow many enemy ships are there? Which are real and which are illusion?â

âImpossible to accurately determine, sir. I counted fourteen targets before they started firing and filling the space between us with ionizing plasma. Now?â¦â Mathematical symbols raced along her length, flashing blue and indigo. âCross-indexing similar mirrored images and extrapolating, I estimate there are currently between three and five operational ships, sir.â

Admiral Whitcomb gritted his teeth and concentrated. He had to get this ship movingâtake out one or two enemy craft. Maybe the tangled plasma-filled space would cook the rest of them.

That was their best chance. Their only chance. Heâd have to trust the Master Chief to get that drive conduit fixed.

âVery well, Cortana,â he said. âHeat the *Gettysburg*âs reactor to maximum power and prepare to flood the main-engine plasma conduit. Charge all available weapons turret capacitors.â

âYes, sir. Stand by.â

He glanced at a screen that showed the *Gettysburg* sitting atop them inverted. âIs the launch bay on the *Gettysburg* intact? Can it hold an atmosphere?â

Cortana blinked. âYes, sir. It has a slow leak of thirty-two kilo pascals perââ

âPressurize the bay.â

âAcknowledged, Admiral. However,â Cortana replied, âthat will leave our air reserves dangerously low.â

The Admiral stared at the ships surrounding themâa plasma bolt struck a distant cruiser head-on, and its nose buckled. Gouts of flame flared along its lateral plasma lines. The ship looked like a fish spit with a red-hot poker.

That could have been them.

âHurry up, Chief,â he whispered.

On the displays the Admiral spotted two ships. There was a carrier far away; it looked undamaged. Closer, off the port bow, was a cruiser that, aside from a hole punched through its aft section, was also undamagedâ¦and only ten thousand kilometers away. That was the priority target.

âLay in a new course,â the Admiral ordered. âTwo-four-zero by zero-three-five.â

Lieutenant Haverson took an involuntary step closer to the display, and his face contorted as he worked out the math in his head. âThatâsâ¦a collision course, sir.â

âGlad you concur with my calculations,â the Admiral remarked dryly.

Lieutenant Haverson glanced at the *Gettysburg* and nodded, finally understanding. âAye, sir. A good plan.â

âAdmiral,â the Master Chiefâs voice broke through in a wash of static. *âConduit breach is sealed, sir.â*

âHang on, son,â Admiral Whitcomb said. âThis might be a rough ride. Cortana, give me flank speed now!â

âComplying,â Cortana said. âFlank speed. Conduit is holding. Coming about to two-four-zero by zero-three-five. Collision with

Covenant cruiser at this speed and heading in eighteen seconds.â

Ascendant JusticeâGettysburg accelerated toward a line of wavering orange plasmaâand steamed through it like a ship smashing through a storm wave on the open seas.

Fire splashed over their hulls and burned away layers of armor. The entire hull superstructure groaned. Explosions reverberated through the deck.

âFire on decks eight through twelve,â Cortana reported. âWe have lost plasma turret five. Distance to enemy ship six thousand kilometers and closing.â

âInitiate a roll, Cortana. Make it thirty degrees per second. Thatâll spread out the damage over more surface area.â

âRoll maneuver, aye. Attitude thrusters set to maximum burn.â She exhaled, and her holographic image flickered with irritation. âThis will make a targeting solution difficult, sir.â

âSet firing range of plasma turrets for point blank,â the Admiral told her.

Cortana hesitated for a full second. âYes, Admiral.â

The space on the external cameras slowly began to spin as their ship spiraled toward their intended target.

The Covenant cruiser came about to face them. Its plasma turrets glowed like angry red eyes.

âLieutenant, take the weapons station. Cortana, give us a firing solution and manual fire control.â

Haversonâs hands moved quickly over the Covenant holographic control surfaces. âCortana has a firing solution, sir. Activate weapons?â

âStand by, Lieutenant.â

âTheyâll get off the first salvo, sir,â Lieutenant Haverson said. Although his voice was calm, a drop of sweat trickled down his freckled cheek.

âI hope they do,â the Admiral replied. âIt may be the only thing that saves us.â

Lieutenant Haverson took a deep breath, nodding. âWeapons standing by, sir.â

âCortana, make ready to vent the *Gettysburg*âs launch bay.â

âAye, sir. Overriding bay door safeties. Distance to target three thousand kilometers.â

The Covenant cruiser fired. Lances of energy launched and veered toward *Ascendant Justice*â¦and arced away in cork-screw

spirals and right angles. The space between the two large masses was still tangled and fractured.

âTwo thousand kilometers,â Cortana reported.

âStay on course,â the Admiral said. âAnd continue to hold fire.â

Lieutenant Haversonâs jaw clenched, and his hands trembled over the controls.

The enemy cruiser filled the displays. Its plasma turrets recycled and glowed a dull red.

âOne thousand kilometers,â Cortana announced.

âAdmiral?â Lieutenant Haverson asked.

âHold your fire.â

âFive hundred kilometers,â Cortana said. âThree hundredâ¦twoâ¦collision imminent.â

The Admiralâs fist clenched. He barked, âFire! All turrets, fire! Cortana, depressurize the launch bay and give us full power to port.â

Ascendant Justice was a kilometer from the Covenant ship on an intercept course when it fired. The *Gettysburg*âs launch bay doors opened and the air inside explosively decompressedâpropelling the conjoined ships to portâjust enough to miss the cruiser.

Plasma rocketed toward their target. There was no way to miss. White-hot fire impacted on the cruiserâs hull, splashed across its surface, boiled off the armored skin, and corroded the skeletal framework underneath.

âAft cameras,â the Admiral ordered.

On screen he saw fire explode out the opposite side of the cruiser. The warship tilted and rolled belly-up, plasma disintegrating the interior from stern to stem until it reached the fusion core. The ship detonated in a ball of flame. An instant later the explosion twisted and curved as the warped Slipspace field swept away all traces of the enemy ship.

Lieutenant Haverson exhaled and wiped his brow. âExcellent maneuvering, Admiral.â

âDonât waste your breath on victory speeches yet, son.â The Admiral scrutinized the tactical display and spotted the other ship. âThere. Weâve got a new target.â

He pointed to a ship half obscured in the plasma fog: the carrier, intact, with a cloud of gnats swarming about it. Seraph

fighters dived and intercepted plasma and meteor bolts that got too close. The resulting fireballs deflected the impacts from the hull.

âSheâs got a smart Captain,â the Admiral muttered. âSo we canât use the same trick twice.â

Five explosions rattled *Ascendant Justice*, and the ambient blue light on the bridge flickered.

âMeteor impact,â Cortana replied. âWe just lost plasma turrets two and three. All functionality on decks eight and below has been lost. The structural integrity of this ship, sir, is in danger of imminent collapse.â

âAnother minute, Cortana,â the Admiral told her and continued to search the tactical display. âWe either take out that carrier hereâwhere their shields canât regenerateâor we face them in normal space.â

He tapped the TAC map. âGotcha! Cortana, come about to zero-three-zero by one-four-five, calculate the fastest acceleration and deceleration burns this ship can handle to get us to this object, and move this ship ASAP.â

âYes, Admiral.â

Lieutenant Haverson looked at the map and located what the Admiral pointed at. âThat object is just part of a Covenant ship, the aft section of a cruiser.â

The Admiral nodded. âExactly, Lieutenant. Cortana, howâs the structural integrity of our shipâs nose?â

âSir? The nose?â Cortana paused, then reported, âIntact, sir. Most of the damage has been to the lateralââ

âBring us into direct contact with that hunk of metal, Cortana.â

âAye, sir,â Cortana replied.

Ascendant Justice accelerated toward the broken Covenant ship, and then slowed. The two warships touched; there was a slow grinding noise that echoed along the shipâs frame.

âContact,â Cortana reported.

âPerfect,â Admiral Whitcomb replied. âNew course three-two-zero by two-two-zero. Flank speed. Lieutenant, charge any plasma turret we have left. Cortana, get this ship ready for full reverse power.â

Ascendant JusticeâGettysburg turned and moved toward the Covenant carrierâpushing the broken hull of the other ship

before them.

They accelerated on a collision course.

The turrets on the Covenant carrier heated to white hotâbut they held their fire.

âEight thousand kilometers to enemy ship,â Cortana announced.

âHold this course, Cortana.â

âSix thousand kilometers, sir.â

âStand by,â the Admiral ordered and gripped the railing again with his sweating hands.

âTwo thousand kilometers.â

âFull reverse power now!â

The engines rumbled, and the hull of *Ascendant Justice* shuddered.

The wrecked Covenant ship on their nose screeched as its momentum carried it along at the faster velocity. It pulled free of *Ascendant Justice*â¦tumbled directly toward the enemy carrier.

âMass impact on carrier in four seconds,â Cortana said. âThree seconds.â

The carrier fired its plasma at the incoming mass. Flames heated the wreckage, punched though its armor and hull, and melted the alloy.

The mass, however, continued forward, shattered and moltenâbut its velocity was undiminished.

It crashed into the carrier and sent it spinning to starboard. The carrierâs hull breached along a dozen rents, and atmosphere vented and fanned the red-hot metal into gold flames. The launch bays chained with explosions.

âFire all weapons, Lieutenant!â

Ascendant Justice fired its remaining turrets. Plasma cut into the carrier and sliced it to the core. Every deck flashed with fire and became an inferno.

âThatâs the best we can do,â Admiral Whitcomb whispered. âCortana, get us out of here. Transition to normal space.â

Cortanaâs holographic silhouette blackened with swarming calculations. âEngaging Slipspace matrix.â

Blotches of inky black welled within the sea of fire. Tiny stars winked on within those pools of darkness. The plasma-charged atmosphere faded, and the enemy ships ablaze vanished.

âCut all power to the engines,â the Admiral ordered.

Admiral Whitcomb gazed at the blackness and stars. âNow, where the hell are we?â

Section V
Massacre At Eridanus Secundus

Chapter Twenty-Six

Time: Date Record [[Error]] Anomaly \ Date Unknown \ Hybrid Vessel *GettysburgâAscendant Justice,* In Anomalous Slipspace Bubble.

The Master Chief woke.

Consciousness, however, was a slight overestimation of his condition. His blurry vision came into focus slowlyâ¦but there was nothing to see except the interior of his visor. Amber status lights winked on.

Pain washed over his feet, his right thigh, and his hand. Good. He was alive. He knew from previous experience that this was the tail end of shockâ¦and the stunning, numbing effects of that state were wearing off.

He felt the familiar weight and reactive circuits of his MJOLNIR armor surrounding him. The coppery-tinged flavor of biofoam coated his mouth, so he also surmised that his injuries had been recently treated.

And there was gravity. The press against his back was a great comfort to the Master Chief. The next time someone wanted him to go on a zero-gee op, heâdâ

âWelcome back,â Cortana said, interrupting his thoughts. A faint light flickered on to his left.

He turned onto his side. The burns on his extremities protested and shot lances of pain up his hand and feet.

He was in a med bay. The lights were turned down low, and he saw that he was the only person occupying a recovery bed. Biomonitors pulsed along one wall, displaying his vital signs and MRI snapshots.

A holographic projection pad stood next to his bed. Cortanaâs tiny figure, strobing with symbolic logic code, waved to him, and when he didnât immediately respond she crossed her arms impatiently. âMRIs show no concussion, no subdural or epidural hematomas. You must have a thicker skull than I thought.â

âWhere am I?â

âDeck thirty-two on the UNSC frigate *Gettysburg,*â Cortana told him. âOr whatâs left of it, anyway.â

âWhat happened?â

Cortana sighed. âAre you referring to what happened since I left you on Reach? Or the outcome of the Slipspace battle? Or do you mean what happened since that battle?â

âThe battle, first,â he said and struggled to get up. âI presume we won.â

Standing was too painful, though, and the strength seemed to have been drained from his muscles. He eased himself back to his original horizontal position.

Cortanaâs pale blue light dimmed and her gaze dropped to the deck. âBlue Team successfully repaired the main-engine conduit.â

âI remember,â the Master Chief murmured. âThe repair part of it, at least. There was an explosionâ¦â

âA plasma bolt,â Cortana corrected. She sighed. âIâm sorry, Chief, but only you and SPARTANS 093, 043, and 104 survived that blast.â

Grace, Will, and Fred were alive, but Li, Anton, and Warrant Officer Polaski had been killed in action. He remembered Polaskiâs scream, then Antonâs outline as the flash of white-hot fire swept over the hull.

âAcknowledged,â he said as graciously as he could muster, but he heard bitterness give an edge to his voice.

It struck him as odd that Polaskiâs death affected him as well. Heâd seen thousands of UNSC soldiers die. She hadnât hesitated to transport Blue Team on a mission that was insanely dangerous. She had survived the battle of Reach, the crash landing on Halo, the Flood, and everything elseâthen she had bravely volunteered for this mission, too, and perhaps saved all their lives.

She might have made a good Spartan. There were worse eulogies.

The Master Chief sighed, called up his team roster on his heads-up display, and marked Anton and Li as Missing in Action. He paused to view all the others on that list; his first and best friend, Sam, was thereâ¦and he hadnât even realized a dozen more had been listed as MIA.

He saved the changes to the roster and closed the file.

âWhat about Kelly and Linda?â he asked Cortana.

Cortana looked up and flipped the hair from her luminous

eyes. She paced a small circle on the holographic pad and then said, âSPARTAN 087, Kelly, is recovering from second-degree burns on seventy-two percent of her body. Doctor Halsey has accelerated tissue regrowth with dermacortic steroids. She should be fully healed in a matter of daysâ¦although her mobility will be severely hampered until then.â

âAnd Linda?â

âAccessing status.â Cortana paused for a full second. âDoctor Halsey has SPARTAN 058 currently in medical facility alpha, three decks above us. She still has her in a cryogenic state and is presently performing exploratory surgery. She has given me several orders to prepare the flash clone banks for replacement organs pending transplant.â

âSo sheâs alive?â the Master Chief asked.

âTechnically,â Cortana replied, âno.â For a moment there was a look of genuine concern on her faceâbut it quickly vanished. âThe doctor and Admiral Whitcomb have debated the risk of attempting to revive SPARTAN 058 before we reach a major medical facility. Doctor Halsey, Iâm sure, will brief you when she has all the facts, Chief.â

John frowned at this lack of detail. He didnât appreciate Cortanaâs increasingly difficult attitude, one that had slowly shifted ever since she interfaced with the Forerunner computer system on Halo. He made a mental note to ask Dr. Halsey about Linda laterâ¦and heâd ask her about Cortana, too.

âAll other hands on board are accounted for?â the Master Chief asked.

âYes, Chief. They are all engaged in repairs to the conjoined ships. We took tremendous damage in the expanded Slipspace from plasma bombardments and mass impacts. Both shipsâ superstructures, however, remain intact. The *Gettysburg*âs reactor is online and operating at sixty-seven percent capacity. *Ascendant Justice*âs reactor is offline undergoing repairs. Five of our seven plasma turrets require refit. And worst, *Ascendant Justice*âs engines are crippled. We have less than three percent operational thrust.â

âCan the ship still jump to Slipspace? Are we stranded out here?â

âA jump is possible,â Cortana said. She shook her head the way an older sister might when her baby brother asked a naive

question. âIt wouldnât do us any good, though. The alien artifact in Doctor Halseyâs possession emits high levels of radiation in Slipspace. This unknown radiation even penetrates your suitâs shields. I estimate lethal exposure in just under seventy-two hours. Also, that radiation would serve as a beacon for any Covenant ships prowling Slipspace, searching for us.â

âSo weâre stuck between systems.â

âNegative,â Cortana replied, and her voice took on a new chill. âAdmiral Whitcomb is quite adamant that we risk another Slipspace transitionâregardless of the cost in human life. Otherwise, it would be weeks before we would be able to contact UNSC High Command.â

HighCom? Two facts suddenly clicked into place: the Admiralâs need to contact the rest of the Admiraltyâno matter the priceâand Dr. Halseyâs attempts to revive Linda.

âWhatâs compelling the Admiralâs tactics, Cortana?â

Cortanaâs holographic outline softened. âI told you this before, Chief, but apparently it did not stick in your semiconscious state.â She then came into sharp focus and crossed her arms over her chest. âThe Covenant have discovered the location of Earth.â

The Master Chief stood, suddenly wide awake and alert. He set aside his pain and fatigue.

âExplain,â he demanded.

Cortana outlined her discovery of the encoded subchannel within normal Covenant communiquÃ©s. She explained how the Covenantâs military orders were disseminated with startling efficiently, and she then showed him symbols that represented the coordinates for Solâ¦and Earth.

He stood mute and listened. The UNSC had worked so hard, for so long, to preserve this secret. It was only a matter of time; he had always known that the Covenant had to find Earth sooner or later. He had, however, always thought it would be laterâ¦and never now.

The Master Chief stared at the tiny triangles, squares, dots, and bars that made up the spatial coordinates. âWeâve seen these before, on CÃ´te dâAzur.â

âYes. And according to Doctor Halsey, her team on Reach found similar markings in the underground vaults.â

âWhatâs the connection?â

âUnknown.â

The Master Chief put these facts aside for the moment; the greater meaning of the symbols and translation heâd leave up to Cortana and ONI. The only insight that mattered to him was that the Covenant were going to attack Earth.

âWas there a timetable or any other data encoded on the subchannel?â he asked.

âAffirmative. Thereâs a coordinated series of orders to Covenant warships scattered across the galaxy to rendezvous with a mobile command-and-control base they call the *âUnyielding Hierophant.â* When they have sufficient force, they will collectively make the jump to Earth.â

The Master Chief moved toward the medical bayâs doors. They automatically parted. âWhere is Admiral Whitcomb?â

âThe Admiral is currently on the bridge,â Cortana replied. âBut Doctor Halsey gave me strict orders that you are not toââ

âI donât take orders from civilians,â he snapped. âNot even her.â The Master Chief passed out of the medical bay and marched down the corridor.

âYou know,â Cortana said, her voice now coming from his helmet speaker, âyour attitude has degraded since we started this missionâeven before the battle for Reach.â

âNoted,â he replied.

The dim white light flooding the *Gettysburg*âs passages was a welcome change from the blue illumination the Covenant used on their ships. John was glad to have his feet once more firmly planted on the raw steel decks of a human vessel, even if the walls of this passage were soot-stained.

He entered the Command elevator and punched the button for the bridge. The gentle acceleration made new pain flare along his arms, and ligaments popped in his chestâbut he gritted his teeth and banished the pain from his awareness.

When the doors parted, the Master Chief paused, taking in the sad state of the *Gettysburg*âs bridge. The front viewports had been blown out and recently replaced with welded plates of hull armor. A trio of monitors had been hastily bolted in place over them. Crystallized freeze-dried blood covered the navigation and ops consoles. Only three control stations were lit: engineering, computer status, and MAC ops.

But most disconcerting was that only Admiral Whitcomb and

Lieutenant Haverson were present on a bridge that usually needed a staff of thirty officers. The room was as still and empty as a tomb.

âMaster Chief,â Admiral Whitcomb said, slightly surprised.

âSir.â He stood at attention and snapped off a crisp salute. âPermission to enter the bridge.â

âGranted, son,â the Admiral said.

âWhatâs your status, Chief?â Haverson asked. âDoctor Halsey told us it would be days before you recovered.â

âIâm one hundred percent, sir,â he said.

As if she had heard this statement, Dr. Halsey opened a COM channel, and a tiny video feed popped onto his heads-up display. Her glasses reflected an ambient orange light from wherever she was, and he could not see her eyes.

âJohn, I need to speak with you.â

âIâm with Admiral Whitcomb and Lieutenant Haverson, maâam. When Iâm done I can speak with you.â

She was silent a moment, then said, *âVery well.â* The COM winked off.

The Master Chief felt a pang of regret for being so terse with her.

âGet over here, son,â the Admiral said. He returned his attention to the clear plastic wall dotted with stars and the diamond symbols that represented UNSC military outposts in this region of space. âWeâre in something of a tough spot.â

He marched to the Admiral and Haverson and studied the chart with them. âCortanaâs briefed me, sir. The Covenant know Earthâs location and are on the move, most likely preparing a massive attack.â

âThatâs the gist of it, Iâm afraid,â Haverson said, and the Chief noticed deep circles of fatigue ringing the younger manâs eyes. âTo complicate matters, we can barely navigate. Weâve been working around the clock to restore our ships, but weâd need an engineering crew of a hundred and a space dock to get these wrecks into fighting shape.â

Admiral Whitcomb frowned at the Lieutenantâs dour assessment and added, âAnother trick is that the crystal we picked up on Reach emits radiation in Slipspace. Enough to kill everyone after only a few more hours of exposure.

âBut weâre hanging on to the alien device. It changes the

properties of Slipspace, as you already sawâbut with one more twist. In the few minutes we were in that tangled version of Slipspace, we traveled hereââhe drew a tiny circle on the map, centered on their positionââwhich under normal circumstances should have taken us days.â

âWe attempted to briefly jump again,â Haverson added, âbut nothing extraordinary occurred. This unusually long jump may have been caused by the energy added to Slipspace by our battle with the Covenant.â

âIn any case,â Admiral Whitcomb said, âif we learn what makes this crystal tick, itâd give us a hell of an edge on the Covenant.â

âI see, sir.â

The Chief scrutinized their locationânot quite the definition of *the middle of nowhere*, but close. He noted that there were three star systems within the circle.

Haverson also peered at the chart. He touched one of the star symbols within their range, and statistics scrolled alongside the object. He sighed. âThis system was glassed in 2530, so thereâs no chance there would be anyone to help us there. And the other two systemsâ¦â He shook his head. âUninhabited.â

âHell,â Admiral Whitcomb said and tugged on his mustache, âwe pulled out of this region of space almost as soon as the war started. The Covenant came in, burned Eridanus and the other Outer Colonies, and then moved on without batting an eye.â

âEridanus?â The Chief stepped closer and touched the data scrolling next to the tiny star. âI know this place.â He turned to the Admiral. âAnd there is a human colony there, sirâjust not one that the UNSC cares about anymore. If I had to guess, Iâd bet that the Covenant never found it, either. We might be able to expedite repairs there.â

The Admiral stared thoughtfully at him. âYou sure? Sure enough to bet our lives and Earth on that hunch, Chief?â

The Master Chief looked again at the tiny dot on the map.

It wasnât Eridanus he was thinking of. It was the surrounding asteroid beltâ¦and a mission he and his team had executed twenty years ago.

âYes, sir. Iâm sure.â

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Time: Date Stamp [[Error]] Anomaly \ Revised Date Estimated 0450, September 12, 2552, Hybrid Vessel *GettysburgâAscendant Justice*, In Slipspace En Route to Eridanus System.

Dr. Halsey buzzed the door open, and the Master Chief entered the clean room.

âYou wanted to see me, Doctor?â He quickly looked the room overâtaking in the adjoining surgical suites, and the strange orange sterile-field lamps set every meter into reflective recessions in the tiled walls.

Dr. Halsey had clamped five displays onto the arm of one of the contoured examination chairs in this room. She sat cross-legged in the chair and balanced a large alphanumeric-symbolic keyboard on her lap. Perched precariously on the side tray were Styrofoam cups of half-drunk coffee.

She waved the Chief forward. âI see you are ignoring sound medical advice by moving before you have fully healed.â

âIâm fine, maâam,â he replied.

She snorted in disbelief. âJohnâIâve never known you to tell an outright lie. Iâm picking up telemetry from your armor, right now.â She swiveled one of the monitors on her chair so he could see erratic biosigns pulsing on the screen. âWhat with the burns, contusions, fractures, and internal bleeding, you should be in shock. The only sleep youâve gotten in a week was unconsciousness brought on by your wounds. And you say youâre âfineâ?â

He stood and said nothing.

âVery well. I suppose you know your limitations better than anyone else.â She turned the display back around. âI wanted to speak about your report on the alien constructâHalo. Iâve pieced together a bit of the story based on Admiral Whitcombâs recounting of your adventures, Cortanaâs debriefing, and the mission logs of Locklear, Johnsonâ¦and the curious partial mission log of one PFC Wallace Jenkins.â

The Master Chief shifted uneasily.

âThere are inconsistencies that I must resolve before we get back to Earth.â She pushed her glasses higher onto the bridge of her nose. âOne of them is Sergeant Johnson.â She tapped in commands on her keyboard. âPlease step closer, John. I want you to see this with me.â

The Master Chief moved alongside her chair. His massive weight thudded through the thick deck plating. Two meters tall and half a ton of metal and somehow Dr. Halsey couldnât help thinking of him occasionally as the same little boy she had stolen from his parents in Elysium City.

No. John *had* changed. She hadnât. She was the one who still carried the three-decade-old festering guilt.

She took a deep breath and refocused her attention on the video records before her. On screen played mission logs that showed Covenant and Marines in firefights, the odd Forerunner architecture in the interior of the Halo construct, and the terrifying omniparasitic life-form known as the Flood.

She replayed the mission record of Private Jenkins and the first Flood attack.

John stiffened as Captain Keyes appeared on screen and as the Flood consumed the Captain and his squad. Sergeant Johnson was there, too, fighting and cursingâ¦until the hordes of tiny, podlike Infection Forms swarmed over him.

âThe Sergeant survived,â she said. âThe only human to have direct exposure to the Flood meta-organism and walk away.â

âI know,â the Master Chief whispered. âIâm not sure how he survived. How could anyone live through that?â

âThatâs the simple part,â Dr. Halsey told him without looking up from her displays. She tapped a key, and the Sergeantâs medical records flashed on screen. âSee, here?â She touched a file dated three years before. âHe was diagnosed with Borenâs Syndrome.â

âI havenât heard of it,â the Chief said.

âIâm not surprised. Itâs caused by exposure to high-yield plasma. Like the burst released by a Covenant plasma grenade. We donât see many casesâpeople usually die from the direct effects of those weapons long before these secondary symptoms manifest.

âApparently, the Sergeant captured a crate of plasma grenades from the Covenant during the Siege of Paris IV. He used

them allâreceived a commendation for braveryâ¦and a twelve-hundred-rad cumulative dose of radiation as an unanticipated bonus.â

John was silent for several minutes. Dr. Halsey wasnât sure if he was reading the computer files, contemplating her words, or trying to confirm all this on a private COM channel with Cortana. His impenetrable armor made discussions with normal social conventions nearly impossible. It irritated her, yet without that armor with its constant hydrostatic pressure and automated biofoam injectors, John would have literally fallen apart by now.

For a fleeting moment she remembered when she had first read Alexander Dumasâs *Man in the Iron Mask*. She had felt terror when the noble prisoner had been encased within that metal shell. How did John cope with the constant suffocating enclosure?

The Master Chief finally said, âI donât see the connection between the Sergeantâs sickness and his surviving the Flood.â

âBorenâs Syndrome,â Dr. Halsey explained, âis characterized by migraines, amnesia, and brain tumorsâ¦and without the proper treatment, death. It disrupts the electrical signals in a personâs nervous system.â

âIs it treatable?â

âYes, but it requires thirty weeks of intensive chemotherapy. Which brings me to this.â She hit the NEXT PAGE key and an official âRefusal of Treatmentâ document appeared on screen. âThe Sergeant did not wait thirty weeks to get back and fight.â

The Master Chief nodded, understanding the heroic, futile gesture. âHow did this disruption of his nervous system save him?â

âIâve deconvoluted the biosigns of the soldiers overtaken by the Flood. The parasite interfaces with a host by forcing a resonant frequency match to each hostâs neural system.â

âAnd the Sergeantâs nervous system is so jumbled that the Flood couldnât force a match?â

âCorrect,â she said. âFurther blood tests show his system bearing traces of Flood DNAâvery much dead and noninfectious, but some gene fragments are intact. I believe this is proof of a failed attempt to possess him. It also appears to have imparted him with some curious regenerative abilities, although I cannot yet fully confirm this side effect.â

The Master Chief seemed to relax a notch from his usual ramrod stiff at-attention stature. This new information seemed to put him at ease. âI think I see.â

âNo,â Dr. Halsey told him, and she removed her glasses. âYou donât.â

âDoctor?â

âDiscovering how he survived is not what I wanted to discuss. Itâs what happens *next* to Sergeant Avery Johnson.â

She shut off her monitors and eased back into the chair. âIâve prepared two separate reports on this for ONI Section Three. The first has all relevant data on my analysis and the possible technology to counter an initial Flood infestation. The second includes the source material: Private Jenkinsâs and Sergeant Johnsonâs mission logs and the Sergeantâs medical files.â

She downloaded the reports onto two data crystals and ejected them from the port on the chairâs arm. She set the clear cubes on the tray and gestured for John to take them. âI leave it up to you which to deliver to Lieutenant Haverson.â

âWhy would I withhold any data, Doctor?â the Master Chief asked and glanced at the crystals.

Her eyes focused past him as she struggled to find the words to match her conflicting emotions. âFor a long time I had thought that we had to sacrifice a few for the good of the entire human race.â She took a deep breath and let it go with a heavy sigh. âI have killed and maimed and caused a great deal of suffering to many peopleâall in the name of self-preservation.â Her steely blue gaze found him. âBut now Iâm not sure that philosophy has worked out too well. I should have been trying to save every single human lifeâno matter what it cost.â

Dr. Halsey pushed the tray bearing the data crystals toward the Master Chief. âIf you give ONI the first report, they may be able to find a countermeasure for the Flood. Maybe. They would have a slightly better chance, however, if you give them the second report.â

âThen Iâll give them the second report.â He picked up the crystal.

âWhich will murder Sergeant Johnson,â she said with a chill in her voice. âONI will not be satisfied to take a sample of blood. They will dissect him to find out how he resisted the Flood. It will be a billion-to-one shot that theyâll ever replicate his unique

medical conditionsâbut theyâll do it anyway. They will kill him because the trade-off is worth it to them.â

The Master Chief picked up the other crystal and then stared at them both lying in his gauntleted hand.

âIs it worth it to you, John?â she asked.

He curled his hand in a fist and held it close to his chest. âWhy do you want me to make this choice?â

âOne last lesson. Iâm trying to teach you something itâs taken me all my life to realize.â She cleared her throat of the lump thickening there. âIâm giving you the chance to make the decision that I thought I couldnât make.â

She glanced at the clock on her display. âIâm sorry. Linda is almost prepped for surgery, and I have several things I *must* accomplish before then. You should go.â

The Master Chief obediently turned and strode toward the exit, but halted in the doorway. âDoctor, donât let her die again.â He then left the room.

Dr. Halsey watched until he rounded the corridor and was gone. She hoped she saw John again before she did what she had to do, but she might not. Would the thought she had planted within him take hold? The gesture might be the only thing she could do to atone for what sheâd done to him and the other Spartans.

Such thoughts were luxuries when there were only a few hours before *Ascendant Justice* exited Slipspace. There was too much to do before then.

She turned all the monitors to face her and typed in the command to unsquelch Cortana.

âLock the door,â Dr. Halsey ordered Cortana. âBoost counterintrusion measures to level seven.â

âDone,â Cortana said. The irritation at having been silenced for the last five minutes was like barbed wire in her voice. âWhat precisely was all that about? Teach the Master Chief a lesson? Giving him a choice? Save one man instead of billions?â

Dr. Halsey ignored her and rapidly typed in commands on her keyboard. âGive me access to your core coordinates four-four-seven.â

âBlock removed,â Cortana said with an exasperated sigh. âAre you going to answer my question?â

âIâm tired of sacrificing others for the âgreater good,ââ Dr.

Halsey replied. âIt never stops, Cortanaâ¦and weâre running out of people to sacrifice.â She tapped in a final command for the memory-wiping worm function and punched the ENTER key.

âWhatââ

âIâm erasing your files on this matter. Iâm sorry, Cortana, but with this, I cannot trust even you.â

Cortana was silenced as the worm burned through her memory and obliterated all inquiries and recordings pertaining to Sergeant Avery Johnsonâs encounter with the Flood.

âCortana, give me an update on your core memory.â

âRecompiling of routines has resulted in a memory-processing footprint reduction of sixteen percent, Doctor. Thank you. That gives me a little more room to think.â

âIâm afraid thatâs all we dare risk,â Dr. Halsey said. âThe Halo and Covenant AI data could become corrupted if I do more. And there is no place safe enough to store that information.â

Dr. Halsey loaded mission reports from Admiral Whitcombâs, Johnâs, and Fredâs teams. She frowned at the official UNSC incident forms as their highlighted time, date, and location stamps scrolled across her screens.

âAre you done with the temporal analysis of these logs?â

âYes, Doctor. You were correct: There is a discrepancy between the Halo team and the team on Reach. The time stamps are off by an average of three weeks. I hypothesize that this was caused by my gravity-influenced Slipspace transition.â

The corners of Dr. Halseyâs mouth flickered into a smile. âIâm disappointed, Cortana. Thatâs a guessâ¦and an incorrect one at that.â

âReally?â Cortana replied with a hint of challenge in her tone.

âDo you have any data from your subsequent gravity-influenced translation to correlate?â

There was a two-second pause, and then Cortana finally answered, âYes, Doctor. There are no temporal displacements on those later jumps.â

âAs I suspected.â Dr. Halsey tapped her finger on her lower lip as she thought. âPlot the temporal irregularities on a space-time surface. Then call up my file on the spatial distortion generated by the alien artifact.â

On the displays appeared two sets of nearly identical curved

membranes that stretched about a central location and time: Reach and the recovery of the strange artifact.

âThat thing not only bends space,â Dr. Halsey whispered to herself, âbut bends time as well.â

âThatâs not possible,â Cortana said. âHow could the artifact on Reach affect us on Haloâlight-years away?â

âDonât think of it as physical distance,â Dr. Halsey replied absentmindedly, staring at the monitors. âYou and John were on an event path intersecting the crystal.â She moved the curves over one another; the time and space surfaces were a perfect match. âYou *had* to be there at that place and time to recover us and remove the crystalâtime and space warped to make that event occur.â

Cortana gave a derisive laugh. âThatâs circular logic, Doctor. It directly contravenes several well-established theoriesââ

âAnd it fits the known data.â Dr. Halsey shut down the files containing her analysis. âI see now why the Covenant are so interested in this object. They mustnât be allowed to get their hands on it. Not them, and certainly not Section Three, either.â

âDoctor?â

Dr. Halsey turned to the screen with her memory-devouring worm and moved it to a new pointer in Cortanaâs core. She executed the programâdestroying the AIâs memory of this conversation, too.

âGive me an update on SPARTAN 058âs condition, Cortana.â

âCore temperature increasing at a steady point-two degrees Celsius per minute, attaining thirty-seven degrees in ten minutes.â

âVery good. Prep and move the flash-cloned liver and kidneys from storage and ready surgical bay three.â

âAye, Doctor.â

Lindaâs medical data winked on a display along with the entire Spartan roster: a long list of every Spartanâs current operational status. Only a handful were left, almost every one of them listed as WOUNDED IN ACTION or MISSING IN ACTION.

âNo KIAs?â Dr. Halsey murmured. She touched SPARTAN 034âs entry. âSam is listed as missing in action. Why would that be? He died in 2525.â

âONI Section Two Directive Nine-Three-Zero,â Cortana replied. âWhen ONI went public with the SPARTAN-II program,

it was decided that the reports of Spartan losses could cause a crippling loss of morale. Consequently, any Spartan casualties are listed as MIA or WIA, in order to maintain the illusion that Spartans do not die.â

âSpartans never die?â she whispered. Dr. Halsey swiveled out of the contoured chair and pushed the monitors out of her way with a sudden violence. âIf only that were true.â

There was so much to do and so little time left for her, the Spartans, and the human race. She could do something, though. Sheâd save them one person at a time, starting with Linda, then Kelly, and then a handful of very important others.

Of course, it meant betraying everyone who trusted herâbut if that was the only way Dr. Halsey could save herself, and her soul, then sheâd do it.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

1930 Hours, September 12, 2552 (Revised Date, Military Calendar) \ Hybrid Vessel *GettysburgâAscendant Justice,* In Slipspace En Route to Eridanus System.

Black space churned with pinpricks of light; it split, and the *GettysburgâAscendant Justice* appeared in the Eridanus system.

The Master Chief stood on the *Gettysburg*âs bridge. Heâd wanted to be on the medical deck when Dr. Halsey had finished with Linda, be there when she woke upâ¦or be there in case she never woke up. But he had to be here; this was his idea, and he was the closest thing they had to an expert on this place.

âSystems check,â Admiral Whitcomb ordered.

Lieutenant Haverson leaned over the ops console and flicked through several screens. âResidual radiation fading,â he said. âNavigation systems and scanners coming back online.â

Fred stood at the Engineering station and reported, âReactors at sixty percent. Slight hysteresis leak in coil ten. Compensating.â

âPlasma?â the Admiral asked as he settled into the Captainâs chair.

Cortanaâs ghostly image flickered onto the holographic pad next to the star chart.

âWe can fire only one turret,â she replied, and a wash of red flashed across her image then cooled to its normal deep blue. âThe other two functional turrets are offline; their magnetic coils refuse to align. It might be a side effect of the artifactâs radiation.â

âOne shotâ¦,â the Admiral muttered. He tugged on the end of his mustache and sighed. âThen weâll just have to make it count.â He turned to the Master Chief. âLead the way, son.â

The Master Chief stared at the three large monitors that had replaced the bridgeâs observation windows. Eridanus blazed in the center of one display; stars shone with a steady brilliance. âMove us one-point-five astronomical units relative to the sun,â he said. âHeading zero-nine-zero by zero-four-five.â

âDestination one-point-five AU,â Haverson said. âHeading confirmed. Coming about.â

âPlot an elliptical course parallel to the plane of the asteroid belt,â the Master Chief added. âCortana, scan for asteroids approximately two kilometers in diameter.â

âScanning,â she said. âThis might take some time. There are more than a billion moving objects, some of them in deep shadow.â

âTell me again about your old mission,â Admiral Whitcomb said. âYou and the other Spartans were here before?â

âYes, sir,â the Chief replied. âMyself, Fred, Linda, Kelly, and Sam. It was the Spartansâ first real mission: an infiltration into a rebel base. We captured their leader and got him to ONI for debriefing.â

âI didnât even know the Spartans were around in 2525,â Lieutenant Haverson said.

âYes, sir,â Fred answered. âWe just didnât have MJOLNIR armor or the advanced weaponry we have today. We looked like any other NavSpecWar team.â

âI very much doubt that,â Haverson said under his breath.

The Admiral raised one bushy eyebrow. âYou mean five people made a zero-gee vacuum infiltration onto this space station? And then exfiltrated with a prisoner who happened to be the guy in charge of the place?â

âYes, sir. That was the basic plan.â

âI suppose it went off without a hitch?â

The Master Chief was silent for a moment as he remembered the dozens of dead people they had left behind on that baseâ¦and he felt a pang of regret. At the time he hadnât thought twice about removing *any* obstacle that would have compromised his mission, human or otherwise. Now, after fighting for humanity for two decades, he wondered if he could shoot another human without a good reason.

âNo, sir,â the Master Chief finally replied. âThere were enemy casualties. And we had to blow their cargo bay to escape.â

âSo,â the Admiral said, tapping his fingers on the arm of the Captainâs chair, âtheyâre not going to be happy to see a UNSC ship knocking on their front door?â

âI wouldnât expect so, sir.â

âFaint emissions on the D-band detected,â Cortana said. âCome about to new heading three-three-zero.â

âAye,â Haverson said. âThree-three-zero.â

âItâs gone, now,â she said, âbut I definitely heard *something*.â

âKeep on this course,â Admiral Whitcomb ordered. âWeâll run it down.â

âThereâs one thing I donât understand,â Haverson said as he squinted at the forward displays. âWhy are these people even here?â

âPirates and insurgents,â the Admiral answered. âThey hijack UNSC ships, sell arms, and trade black market commodities. Youâre probably too young to remember, Lieutenant, but before the Covenant War not everyone wanted to be part of an Earth-ruled government.â

âIâm fully aware of the rebellion,â Haverson said. âBut why continue to stay separated from UNSC forces when the Covenant War started? Surely their chances of survival would be better with us?â

The Admiral snorted a derisive laugh. âSome people didnât want to fight, son. Some just wanted to hideâ¦in this case, literally under a rock. Maybe they think the Covenant wonât bother with âem.â A smile flickered across his face. âWell, weâre about to change all that for them.â

The elevator doors parted, and Dr. Halsey stepped onto the bridge. She removed her glasses and rubbed her eyes. She looked to the Master Chief as if she had just retuned from an intense fightâfatigued and shocked. He noticed a single drop of blood on the lapel of her wrinkled white lab coat.

âSheâs fine,â Dr. Halsey whispered. âLinda will make it. The flash-cloned organs took.â

The Master Chief exhaled the breath he had been unconsciously holding. He glanced over to Fred, who nodded to him. John nodded back. There were no words to express how he felt. One of his closest teammates, his friend, someone he had thought deadâ¦was alive again.

âThank you, Doctor Halsey,â he said.

She waved her hand dismissively, and there was a strange look in her eyesâalmost as if she had regretted the success of her operation.

âDamn good news,â Admiral Whitcomb said. âWe could use another hand on deck.â

âHardly,â Dr. Halsey replied, suddenly looking much more

alert. âSheâll need at least a week to recoverâeven with the biofoam and steroid accelerants I have her on. Then sheâll barely be able to get on her feet. She wonât be combat-ready.â

GettysburgâAscendant Justice moved into the plane of the asteroid belt, and three rocks appeared on the screens.

âThis region is the source of the D-band signal,â Cortana told them. âThere are three possible candidates based on the size parameters you gave me, Chief.â

âWhich one is it?â the Admiral asked.

âOnly one is rotating fast enough to generate a three-quarter-gravity internal environment,â Cortana replied.

âThatâs it,â the Master Chief replied and nodded toward the central display. The rock hadnât changed much in the last twenty years. Was it possible the place had been abandoned? The D-band transmission that Cortana detected could have been an automated signal, weak from years of drain on a single batteryâ¦or the lure for a trap.

âAdmiral?â

âI know, Chief,â he said. âTheyâve baited the hook and weâre taking itâ¦at least thatâs what itâs supposed to look like.â He chuckled. âCortana, power up every turret on our Covenant flagship.â

Her holographic body flushed blue-green and she crossed her arms. âLet me remind you, sir, that of the three working turrets, two are offline. I have no way to aim the plasma. The magneticââ

âI know, Cortana. But theyââthe Admiral stabbed a finger at the displaysââdonât know that.â

âYes, sir,â she said. âHeating them up now.â

âPower dropping,â Fred warned the Admiral as he peered at the Engineering screens. âDown to forty-four percent.â

âLieutenant Haverson,â the Admiral barked, âopen a channel on the D-band. Itâs time we introduced ourselves.â

âAye, sir. Frequency matched and channel open.â

The Admiral stood. âThis is the UNSC frigate *Gettysburg*,â he barked, his voice full of authority and colored with his Texas accent. âRespond.â And then he reluctantly added, âPlease.â

Static filled the COM. The Admiral waited patiently for ten seconds, and then his boot started to tap on the deck. âNo need to play possum, boys. Weâre not here for a fight. We want toââ

He made a sudden throat-slitting motion toward Haverson, and the Lieutenant snapped off the COM.

Tiny doors appeared in the two-kilometer-wide rock; from this distance they looked no larger than the pores on an orange. A fleet of ships launched, using the asteroidâs rotational motion to give their velocities a boost. There were approximately fifty craft: Pelicans modified with extra armor and chainguns mounted on their hulls; sleek civilian pleasure craft carrying missiles as large as themselves; single-man engineering pods that sputtered with arc cutters; and one ship that was fifty meters long with oddly angled black stealth surfaces.

âThatâs a *Chiroptera*-class vessel,â Haverson said, awed. âItâs an antique. ONI decommissioned them all forty years ago and sold them for scrap.â

âIs it a threat?â the Admiral asked.

Lieutenant Haversonâs forehead wrinkled as he considered. âNo, sir. They were decommissioned because they broke down every other mission. They had far too many sensitive components without a central controlling AI. The only reason I recall them at all is that they had the smallest operational Shaw-Fujikawa Translight Engine ever produced. No weapons systems, sir. Like I said, itâs not a threatâ¦itâs a museum piece.â

âBut it has Slipspace capability?â Dr. Halsey asked. âMaybe we can use it to get to Earth.â

âUnlikely,â Haverson replied. âAll *Chiroptera*-class vessels were decommissioned by ONIâcritical components removed and the shipsâ operating systems locked down so tight I doubt even Cortana could reactivate them.â

âI wouldnât bet on it,â Cortana muttered.

âNo weapons,â the Admiral said and stared at the blocky geometry of the black ship. âThatâs all I need to know.â

âTheir âfleet,ââ Fred interjected, âis deploying and taking up positions around us in a wide arc. Classic formation. Theyâll flank us.â

âThereâs no real threat from these ships,â the Admiral said to himself. âThey have to know we know that. So why bother with this show?â He scowled at the displays, and his eyes widened. âCortana, scan the nearby rocks for radioactive emissions.â

âReceiving video feed,â Fred announced.

The image of a man flickered on forward screen three. He

was clearly a civilian, with long black hair drawn back into a ponytail and a pointed beard extending a full ten centimeters from his chin. He smiled and made an elegant bow. The Chief, for some reason he could not understand, took an instant dislike to him.

âCaptainâ¦,â the man said in a smooth, resonant tenor voice. âI am Governor Jacob Jiles, leader of this port. What can we do for you?â

âFirst,â Admiral Whitcomb said, âI am not a Captain; I am a Vice Admiral, the Deputy Chief of Naval Operations. Second, you will order your fleet to reverse course and get out of my gunsights before I forget my manners. And third, we insist that you make ready to let us dock on that rock of yours for emergency repairs and refit.â

Jiles considered these requests and then threw his head back and laughed. âAdmiral, my sincere apologies for the confusion in your rank.â He said this with a mocking grin. âAs for your other requests, Iâm afraid I canât accommodate you today.â

âAnd I respectfully suggest you reconsider, Mister Jiles,â the Admiral said in a deadpan tone. âIt would be unfortunate for all of us if I have to insist.â

âYouâre in no position to insist on anything.â Jiles nodded to someone off screen.

âEmissions detected!â Cortana said. âNeutron radiation spikes at seven by three oâclock. One by three oâclock. Picking up five more. Theyâve got nukes.â

âHidden in the asteroid field,â Admiral Whitcomb muttered. âVery good. At least weâre not dealing with fools.â

âIndeed. We are *not* fools,â Jiles replied. âWe have survived the long arm of Imperial Earth and Covenant intrusions.â Someone off camera handed Jiles a data pad with a radar silhouette of *GettysburgâAscendant Justice*; numbers and symbols crawled alongside the picture. He hesitated and crinkled his nose, appearing confused at the odd configuration of mated craft. âWe are also not foolish enough to use overwhelming force when it isnât required. Your âshipâ is ready to fall apart on its own. I hardly think we need to waste one of our precious and expensive nuclear devices to stop you.â

Whitcomb set his hands on his hips. âYou need to rethink the tactical situation, Governor,â he growled. âCortana, find me a

targetâa rock the same size as this âgentlemanâsâ base.â

âDone,â she replied.

âBurn it,â he ordered.

âAye, sir!â

A lance of plasma appeared on the starboard side of *Ascendant Justice*, cut through space, and blasted the surface of a three-kilometer-long stone tumbling through the asteroid belt. Its surface heated to orange, yellow, and then white, sputtering blobs of molten iron and jets of vapor that caused the massive stone to spin faster. The plasma cut through the rock in a wide arcâpunched through the opposite side. The uneven internal heat caused the rock to fracture and explode into fragments. The debris pinwheeled away, leaving helical trails of cooling iron and glittering metallic gas in its wake.

âKeep number two and three turrets hot,â the Admiral said, âand target their base.â

âDone, sir.â

The mocking smile had vanished from Jilesâs face and the color had drained from his golden skin. âPerhaps I was too hasty,â he said. âWhere are my manners? Please come aboard and join me as my honored guest. Bring your staff, too.â He made a quick motion to his crew off camera.

The ships surrounding the *Gettysburg* turned and maneuvered back toward the rotating asteroid.

âJoin me for dinner and we can discuss what you need. You have my word that no one will be harmed.â

Admiral Whitcomb chuckled. âI have no doubt about that, Mister Jiles.â He turned to Cortana. âIf weâre not back in thirty minutes, blast them all to hell.â

He closed off his external speakers and asked, âCortana: tactical analysis.â

Cortana replied: âThe asteroid is a typical ferric oxide composite. Itâs reinforced with a layer of Titanium-A armor. The armor is well camouflaged, but I spotted it with the *Gettysburg*âs deep radar. They have a few sections with ablative undercoats as well. Radarâs bouncing off those sectionsâso would Covenant sensors. Impressive.â

Governor Jiles strolled across the deck, flipped his black fur cape over one shoulder, and shook Admiral Whitcombâs hand. Jiles nodded to Haverson. His smile vanished, however, when he looked at the Master Chief and Fred in their MJOLNIR armor. Jiles recovered his grin and bowed low to Dr. Halsey.

âThere are half a dozen guards armed with old MA3 rifles and concealed plasma pistols,â Cortana whispered. âIâm also picking up a fireteam of ten in the side passages, watching.â

âI saw them,â the Chief muttered. âTheyâre overwatch and backup, just in case. No problem.â

âThis way, please,â Jiles said, and with a flourish he led them through a narrow corridor.

The Chief took one last look at the docking bay. It seemed smaller than he remembered it. Twenty years ago he and his team had blown off the external doors, stolen a Pelican, escaped, and left a dozen men dead on the deck.

His team had accomplished that mission without MJOLNIR armor. It hadnât been developed yetâso there was no way anyone here could have known that John and Fred were part of the team that had extracted the last âgovernorâ of the base, the traitor Colonel Watts. Yet Jilesâs guards glared at John as if they knew everything.

As the Master Chief stepped into the corridor, Cortana informed him: âThis passage is from a UNSC cargo vessel, ripped out and reinforced with a bulkhead every ten meters. Airtight and tough. This place can take a lot of damage before buckling.â

âGood place for an ambush, too,â the Master Chief said, and kept one eye on his motion tracker.

They *were* being followed. Three contacts behind them, and three ahead, keeping pace.

The Master Chief had an urge to step in front of the Admiral and Dr. Halsey and clear the passage with a burst of fire. But this

situation required diplomacy, something John was ill suited for. He wished the Admiral had taken Johnâs suggestion to bring more Spartans with him. Or at least to have two of them infiltrate while the Admiral and this Jiles spoke.

They were led to a circular room. Half the far wall retracted, revealing thick red velvet curtains, which also slowly pulled away and exposed the half-meter-thick windows that overlooked the asteroid field. Beyond was a gentle ballet of rocks tumbling, rotating, and bouncing off one another in slow motion.

Men carried in a long table, threw a white silk cloth over it, and smoothed it down. Then a succession of women carried in silver trays heavy with fruit, steaming meats, and chocolates, and a dozen decanters sloshing with amber, ruby, and clear liquors.

Padded chairs were brought in for them all. âPlease.â Jiles motioned toward Dr. Halsey and he pulled out a chair for her. âRelax and sit down.â

The Master Chief took up a position by the door where he had a clear view of the entire room. Fred made sure the corridor was empty and then sealed the door.

The Chief checked behind the curtains for hidden men, surveillance devices, or false passages.

âCortana?â he whispered.

âLooks clear,â she said. âIâm not detecting anything. Walls are half a meter of Titanium-A.â

âWeâre clear,â the Master Chief told the Admiral.

Dr. Halsey finally sat in the proffered chair, smoothed her skirt, and Jiles gently slid the chair under her. He offered her a plate of plump strawberries, which she graciously declined.

Haverson took one of the strawberries, however, and bit into it. âDelicious,â he remarked.

Jiles inclined his head. âOur hydroponics facilityââ

âWith respect, Governor, thereâs no time for chitchat,â Admiral Whitcomb said. âThe clockâs ticking. In more ways than you might realize.â

Jiles sighed and sat in a chair covered in gold leaf and black velvet. He threw his legs over one of the chairâs arms and laced his hands behind his head. âYou have my complete and full attention, Admiral.â

âGood,â Whitcomb said, frowning at Jilesâs disregard for the seriousness of their predicament.

Admiral Whitcomb laid it out for him in short, easy-to-understand sentences: the fall of Reach, the Covenantâs search for an alien technology, the chase and battle in Slipspace, and the unclassifiable radiation that would lead the Covenant through Slipspaceâ¦to here.

As he spoke, Governor Jiles set his feet onto the floor, and his relaxed position solidified. He leaned forward and set his elbows on the table. His congenial smile slowly tightened into a scowl.

âBloody Elisa!â he shouted, jumped to his feet, and swept a decanter off the table. The glass shattered and ruby-colored brandy spattered across the hardwood.

John and Fred had Jiles instantly in their gunsights, but the Admiral held up his hand.

ââBloody Elisaâ?â the Chief asked Cortana.

âThe patron saint of vacuum,â the AI replied. âSheâs popular among civilian pilots.â

âIâd guess,â the Admiral told Jiles, âthat we have less than a day before they find us.â

âAnd what,â Jiles said slowly, controlling his anger, âdo you suggest *I* do about it?â

âThatâs the simple part of all this, Governor. You can help us, or you can try to kill me and my crew, and sell our ships for whatever the black market will bear. They should yield quite a profitâ¦provided the Covenant let you live long enough to cash in.â

The Admiral grabbed a decanter, poured a glass of wine, took a sip, and nodded appreciatively. âNow, assuming you manage to outwit our shipâs AIâwhich I very much doubtâand assuming further you somehow disable our shipâs weapons before our AI blows your base to atomsâwhich I also doubtâthen youâll have a Covenant fleet to contend with. And I donât think theyâre going to be sociable, sit down, drink your wine, and discuss this like gentlemen.â

Jiles placed his face into his hand and rubbed his temples.

âMaybe youâre thinking,â the Admiral said, âthat youâve kept this operation of yours hidden this long. From the UNSC. From the Covenant. Why should this be any different? Well, *we* found you easily enough. I donât think the Covenant will blink at overturning every rock in this asteroid belt to find you.â

Governor Jiles picked up a new bottle and filled a glass to the

brim. He downed the drink in one gulp. âAnd the other option?â he asked coldly. âI help you? And together we fight the Covenant? If they come in the force you claim, what difference will it make?â

âIf you help us,â the Admiral said, âget my ship repaired so we can make the jump to Earth, Iâll evacuate all your people. I promise you and your crew amnesty.â

Jiles laughed. His cordial smile returned, and he asked, âDo you have any proof of any of this? That the mighty Reach is gone? That you have a new alien technology? Or that the Covenant are on their way here?â

âChief!â Cortana cried in alarm. On his helmetâs heads-up display, a schematic of the Eridanus system appeared. A NAV marker flashed near the third planet. It expanded into the familiar curved radar silhouette of a Covenant cruiser.

âWe have company,â the Master Chief said. He strode to the window and pointed. âThere.â

The blue glow of Covenant engines flared as the ship came about and accelerated toward the asteroid belt.

âThereâs your proof, Governor,â Admiral Whitcomb growled.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

2000 Hours, September 12, 2552 (Revised Date, Military Calendar) \ Aboard Hybrid Vessel *GettysburgâAscendant Justice,* Station-Keeping In Eridanus System.

Admiral Whitcomb, the Master Chief, Fred, and Lieutenant Haverson bounded off the elevator and onto the bridge of the *Gettysburg*.

Cortanaâs image flickered on the holographic pad near the star map. âCovenant cruiser is only two hundred thousand kilometers away,â she reported. âClosing fast on an intercept course.â

The Admiral barked orders: âFred, take the Engineering station, Haverson on NAV, and Chief, youâre on Weapons Station One; get it up and running and see if there are any systems we overlooked. Lieutenant, move us away from the enemy on course one-eight-zero by two-seven-zero.â

âOne-eight-zero by two-seven-zero, aye,â Haverson replied. He strapped himself into the NAV station, and his fingers danced over the controls. âComing about, Admiral.â

GettysburgâAscendant Justice turned and moved deeper into the asteroid field.

The Master Chief stepped up to Weapons Station One. He was cross-trained on the weapons-ops system of every class of UNSC warship, but heâd never actually fired any shipborne weapon before. The MAC gun on this frigate was one of the largest weapons in the human arsenal. He wished they had rounds for itâhe wouldâve given anything to launch one of the six-hundred-ton depleted uranium projectiles at that Covenant cruiser. He carefully tapped commands on the keyboard, and the darkened screen came to life. The Chief scrutinized the *Gettysburg*âs weapons inventory.

Governor Jiles appeared on the number three forward display, his face placid except his lips, which pressed together so tightly that they were only a thin white line of concentration.

âGovernor,â the Admiral said. His voice was smooth and

resonated with the absolute authority of command. âIâll maneuver the *Gettysburg* and take a shot at extreme range with our plasma turret. That will blow down that cruiserâs shields. I want you to coordinate with our AI and fire one of your nukes while their shields are downâblast them to bits.â

âA brilliant tactic,â Jiles said, and his lips parted in a mocking smile. âExcept for one problem. We have no nuclear weapons. The ones you detected in the asteroid field were only neutron radiation emitters.â He shrugged. âWe bluffed.â

Admiral Whitcomb cursed quietly. âVery smart, Jiles.â

âYouâll just have to use the seven plasma turrets on your ship, Admiral,â Governor Jiles remarked. âThat should be more than enough toââ

The Admiral chuckled, and he smiled in the same mocking fashion as Jiles. âWe bluffed, too. We only have one turretâ¦and itâs not working so well.â

âIt appears we have both overestimated the other,â Jiles said. âUnder different circumstances this might be amusing.â

âIndeed.â Whitcomb addressed Cortana. âTry and hail that Covenant cruiser. Maybe we can bluff them, too.â

âTheyâre responding,â Cortana replied. âReligious rhetoric aside, theyâre demanding that we stand down and hand over the artifact or they will open fire.â

âGive them our answer,â Admiral Whitcomb said. âFire when ready, Cortana.â

The turret on *Ascendant Justice* warmed, and plasma collected and focused into a thin ruby line that lanced forwardâ

âand unraveled into a wide spiral that coursed over the bow of the *Gettysburg*. The superheated gases boiled away patches of remaining Titanium-A armor and revealed the shipâs skeletal superstructure.

âWhat the hell happened?â the Admiral shouted.

âAnalyzing now,â Cortana replied. âPlasma turret offline. Stand by, sir.â

âI can move my fleet to engage the enemy,â Jiles said uncertainly.

Admiral Whitcomb surveyed the forward screens: Jiles, the approaching Covenant cruiser, and the asteroid field full of rocks floating on invisible currents. He narrowed his eyes, then said: âTheyâd blast you out of space before you could sneeze,

Governor. And you donât have a weapon thatâll get through their shields. NoâIâll draw them off. Evac your people.â

âUnderstood, Admiral.â One of Jilesâs eyebrows gracefully arched, and he bowed. âThank you.â

âFred, move us at best speed. Haverson, come to course zero-nine-zero. Get us closer to that moon-sized chuck of stone, twenty thousand kilometers to port.â

âFlank speed,â Fred said. âAye, sir.â

âCourse change, aye,â Haverson replied.

The *GettysburgâAscendant Justice* glided toward the large rock, and the Covenant cruiser rapidly closed on them. The enemy ship vanished on the displays as they rounded to the dark side of the asteroid.

âNew course. Come about to one-eight-zero,â the Admiral ordered. âFull emergency power to the engines and answer all stop.â

Thrusters spun the ship around, and vibrations rumbled through the weakened hull as it slowed and came to a stop, hidden behind the rock.

âAnswering all stop,â Fred announced.

âSir, we are dead in space,â Lieutenant Haverson said and nervously ran his fingers through his slicked-back red hair. âTraditional tactics advocate speed and maneuverability in ship-to-ship combat.â

âNot in this asteroid field,â Admiral Whitcomb replied. âBut you make a good point about staying maneuverable. Align our nose toward the center of mass of the planetoid, and back us up, one half reverse. Keep us out of the enemyâs gunsights as long as you can.â

âFiring thrusters. Answering one half reverse,â Fred said.

The ship slowly angled toward the center of the large asteroid and backed away.

âCortana?â the Admiral asked. âDo we have a weapons turret or not?â

âYes, sir,â Cortana said, âbut the turretâs magnetic coils that shape and aim the plasma charge have overloaded.â

The Admiral inhaled and sighed explosively. âMaster Chief, you got *anything* on Weapons Station One?â

âArcher missile pods depleted,â the Master Chief answered. He scanned the display, hoping he had missed something. âNo

rounds for the MAC gun. All Shiva nuclear missiles fired as well, sir. The only things left in the tubes are three Clarion spy drones.â

âNo plasma and no missiles,â Admiral Whitcomb said. âWe might as well open an airlock and throw rocks at âem.â

Throw rocks? The Master Chief wondered if they could fashion a slug to shoot from the MAC cannon. Let its magnetic coils propel the mass to supersonic velocities andâ

Magnetic coils?

âSir,â the Master Chief said. âWe may have a way to fire the plasma turret after all. The *Gettysburg*âs MAC gun has seventeen superconducting coils. Cortana might be able to use them to shape and aim the plasma.â

âYes,â the Admiral said, nodding.

âMaybe,â Cortana amended and stared off into space, thinking. âCalculating field strength drop-off now.â The mathematic symbols scrolling across her body increased threefold. She frowned. âThis would be easier if the *Gettysburg* was oriented bottom to *Ascendant Justice*âs top. Iâll have to guess at the interference from the intervening hulls, but it still might work. Chiefâpower it up. Iâll need to recalibrate the pulse generation to match the plasma output.â

âMAC gun magnetic fields coming online,â the Master Chief said as he tapped in commands. âRerouting power from *Ascendant Justice*âs reactor.â

âWe wonât have enough power to move fast if we have to,â Fred remarked, watching the energy fed to the *Gettysburg*âs engines drop to nothing.

âThatâs okay.â The Admiral absentmindedly tugged at the end of his mustache. âWe wouldnât be able to outrun that Covenant cruiser even if we had full power. Our only chance is to take them out *before* they take us out. Launch those Clarion spy drones, Chief. Target the region abeam that planetoidâso we can see around the corner.â

The Master Chief kept one eye on the fluctuating magnetic field strengths of the superconducting coils as he programmed a course for the spy drones. Set to either side of the large asteroid, theyâd effectively give them another set of eyes to see past the obstructing rock.

âDrones away,â the Chief said and launched them; their

feathery propellant trails vanished into the distance.

âCortana,â Admiral Whitcomb said, âslave your targeting system to the feed from those drones. I want a clean shot fired *before* the cruiser crosses that rockâs shadow and shoots at us.â

âWorking,â she replied. âGetting magnetic field variations from the *Ascendant Justice*âtoâ*Gettysburg* energy transfer.â

âDrones in position and images online,â the Master Chief said and pushed the video feed to the forward screen.

Doubled images of the Covenant cruiser appeared. Along its three bulbous sections, lateral plasma conduits glowed and every turret bristled with energy, ready to fire. Their laser batteries obliterated the large asteroids in their path, while the smaller ones simply bounced off their shields. The warship accelerated as it entered the gravitational influence of the planetoid between them.

âTheyâre going to slingshot around,â the Admiral said. âCortana, give me your best targeting solution and fire at will!â

Cortana narrowed her eyes and calculations flashed across her body. âExtrapolating their course and speed,â she breathed. âI got them.â

On Weapons Station One the Master Chief saw the acceleration coils of the *Gettysburg*âs MAC pulseâthen redline with power. Magnetic field lines ballooned, overlapped, and distorted asymmetrically. Static washed across his MJOLNIR armorâs shields, and every electrically conducting surface on the bridge sparked as the magnetic lines of force penetrated through the ship and toward the turret on *Ascendant Justice*.

Their only working turret heated, and plasma gathered at its tip; streamers looped upon themselves like tiny solar flares, vibrated, intensified to orange and then blue-white.

âAlmost there,â Cortana cried. âHang on.â

The ball of squeezed plasma imploded. It instantly boiled away a thirty-meter section of armor and hull from *Ascendant Justice*; the plasma vanished for a split secondâthen a bolt of coiled energy corkscrewed toward the edge of the planetoid.

The Covenant cruiser rounded the planetoid, targeted the *Gettysburg*, and fired.

Cortanaâs single shot impacted on the nose of the enemy craft first. The cruiserâs shield flashed solid silver for a moment and was gone. The supercompressed plasma tore into the hull of the

warshipâexploding the metal where it touched. The plasma forked and detonated outward as it chained through the vessel. Secondary explosions rippled through the alien shipâs hull.

Edges of its shattered hull glowed red and then white hot as their superheated atmosphere vented. The bolt ripped through the engineering compartment, shattered their reactors, and the entire warship blossomed into fire and ejected trails of golden sparks and dying flickers of static electricity.

The five plasma bolts that the Covenant cruiser fired at the *Gettysburg* dispersed into a red haze. There was no longer any magnetic force to shape and guide them to their intended target.

The bridge crew watched the explosions fade from the forward screens. The Admiral said, âStatus?â

Fred tapped the screen of the Engineering station and reported: âEngines and reactor offline. That magnetic pulse did something to them.â

Static washed over Weapons Station One as the Master Chief looked up and said, âMAC accelerating coils intact. Drone one destroyed. Retrieving drone two, sir.â

Cortanaâs holographic presence was missing, but her voice sounded triumphantly through the bridge speakers: âTurret number three destroyed. But if we ever get any of the other six turrets in working order, weâll have a formidable arsenal.â

âWe may not get that chance,â Lieutenant Haverson remarked as he bent over the NAV station. âContacts inbound. Small ships. Dozens of them. Transferring to the forward screens.â

Armored Pelicans, exoskeleton welders, a handful of Longsword singleships, and the odd stealth *Chiroptera*-class vessel appeared on screen.

âJilesâs fleet,â Haverson stated. âAnd he has us exactly where he wants usâdead in the water.â

âIncoming transmission,â Cortana said. âPiping it through.â

âAdmiral Whitcomb?â Jilesâs rich and resonant voice flooded the bridge. âCan I be of some assistance? A tow, perhaps, back to our base so we can expedite repairs to your ships?â

âThat would be most kind of you,â the Admiral said and eased back into the Captainâs chair.

Two *Laden*-class cargo ships came alongside the *Gettysburg* and attached; their engines rumbled.

âI donât understand,â Haverson whispered. âHe had us.â

âNo, he didnât,â Admiral Whitcomb replied. He scowled and added, âGovernor Jiles may not like it, but he needs us now. The Covenant arenât going to send just one ship. After this one goes missing for a while, thereâll be more. A lot more. This is only the start of the battle, son.â

Â

John and his remaining teammates sat in the *Gettysburg*âs machine shop. The room was large enough to fit a Longsword inside, and the walls, ceilings, and deck had robotic arms tipped with welders, multitools, and hydraulic presses. Three of the arms had high-intensity spotlights directed onto the walls and provided a clear, cool, indirect illumination that the Master Chief found soothing after having one too many plasma blasts etch his retinas.

They were here because Admiral Whitcomb had ordered the Spartans to repair their equipment and get at least six hours of sleep. The machine shop was a solid room, reinforced, and unlikely to breach in case they were attacked again.

Linda sat in the corner with her helmet, back torso, and shoulder MJOLNIR armor sections removed.

Fred and Will used two robotic arms to hold her armor in place. They swapped out damaged plates and components with the spare parts theyâd found in ONIâs CASTLE facility on Reach.

Angry red scars crisscrossed Lindaâs pale bodyâthe only external trace of her double transplant operation. Against Dr. Halseyâs advice for strict bed rest, Linda had hobbled down here with her team. She sat cross-legged before a disassembled SRS99C sniper rifle and selected gyro compensators, optics, and adaptive texture barrel sheaths. Linda proceeded to reassemble the precision-made weapon with the care of a loving mother caressing her newborn child.

Without looking up from her rifle she said, âNow I know what you have to do to get a couple of daysâ R-and-R in this outfit.â

âI heard,â Fred remarked, âthat you spent the whole time sleeping, too.â

âThatâs why she likes to snipe,â Will replied. âI caught her snoring last time she posted in that tower on Europa.â

John was glad they could joke about her return from the dead. He couldnât bring himself to join in, though. He had accepted the mantle of command, and CPO Mendez had taught him to repress his external emotional reactions to preserve his authority. Right now, he resented that.

Kelly rolled over and woke up. She nudged Grace, and they sat up, shaking their helmets. â0400,â Kelly told them. âThat was six hours.â

âFelt like a fifteen-minute nap,â Grace muttered. âI just closed my eyes. Youâre kidding, right?â

Kelly looked over to Linda and drew her two fingers across her helmet in the *smile* gesture. Linda returned a rare, bare smile to her.

The smile looked odd to John. He wanted to smile, too, but nothing muchâapart from Lindaâin a long time had given him cause: not the hordes of rebels crawling over and through the *Gettysburg* whom Admiral Whitcomb trusted too much, nor the imminent return of Covenant forces before their engines and weapons could be repairedâ¦and certainly not the hundreds of dead crew members aboard the *Gettysburg*, whom they had collected and placed in cargo bay seven.

The slight click of metal on metal alerted every Spartan in the room. Pistols drew in a blur of motion and rifles leveled at the side hatch as it eased open with a squeak.

Sergeant Johnson and Corporal Locklear stood in the doorwayâfrozen.

âNo one told me this was target practice,â Locklear muttered. âElse I woulda painted a bullâs-eye on my chest.â

âMaster Chief,â the Sergeant said. âReporting as you requested.â

John nodded and lowered his gun, as did the other Spartans. âCome in, Marines.â

As he holstered his weapon, Johnâs hand brushed against the belt compartment that held Dr. Halseyâs data crystals. He hadnât decided which to give to Lieutenant Haverson. Did he sacrifice the Sergeant to save billions from potential Flood infestation? Did it even matter? He had every reason to believe that the Flood had been destroyed with Haloâbut what if he was wrong?

âI wanted you both down here to help us discuss our tactical options,â John told them.

The COM pulsed to life. Dr. Halsey said, *âMaster Chief?â*

âYes, Doctor?â

âI need Kelly to report to Medical Four,â she said. *âShe requires one last injection of dermacortic steroids. And I could use her assistance on another matter.â*

John nodded to Kelly.

She slowly stretched, stood, sighed, and marched out of the room. âIâll be right back,â she said, flexing her burned hands. âDonât plan the overthrow of the Covenant Empire without me.â

âSheâs on her way, Doctor.â

The COM snapped off.

The Master Chief turned to his Spartans and the Marines. âLetâs go over what we know and see if weâve missed anythingâany way to exploit the enemyâs plan.â He set down a data pad with a star map glittering upon its surface.

âThe Covenant are on their way to Earth,â he told them. âThey are gathering at a battle station and then jumping en masse to the Sol system.â

âWhat happens then?â Fred asked.

âAssuming *we* get to Earth first,â Linda answered, âour Fleet will be waiting for them, andââshe pulled back the bolt on her rifle with a *clack*ââtheyâll give them a warm reception.â

âBut what chance will our forces have?â Will asked. There was no fear in his voice, just cool logic. âYou saw Cortanaâs report. There will be hundreds of Covenant warships. I donât think our Fleet or even Earthâs orbital MAC platforms can repel a force that powerful.â

âNo,â the Chief quietly said. âThey canât win. Theyâll try. But the Covenant will eventually take down one of the orbital MACs, slip through, and pick off the ground-based generators. Just like on Reach.â

Fred visibly flinched.

Locklear twisted the red bandanna he had tied on his biceps. âSo we get to watch another fight in space?â he hissed. His fists trembled with barely checked rage. âThere has to be a way to get to those bastards firstâon the ground where we can win. Hell, Iâd even take my chances in hand-to-hand combat. Anything but floating in zero gee and watching Earth get burned.â

âWhat about our original mission?â Linda asked. âFind the Covenant home world?â

âOur priority has to be to warn Earth,â the Chief answered. âAdmiral Whitcomb would insistâ¦and he has the authority to scrub our mission.â

âAnd thereâs no ground between here and Earth where we can take the fight to them,â Locklear said. He unclenched his fist and dropped his gaze to the deck. âSometimes,â he whispered, âI really hate this war.â

Sergeant Johnson worked his mouth but said nothing. He set his hand on Locklearâs wide shoulder and whispered, âStand tall, Marine. Try toââ

The Sergeantâs gaze fell on the data pad and the star map. âHang on a second. What was it you said about no ground to fight on between here and there?â He grinned and picked up the data pad. âWhatâs this?â He tapped a dot on the map, squinted, and read the tiny words. âThisâ¦âUneven Elephantâ?â

âUnyielding Hierophant,â the Chief corrected. âAccording to Cortana, itâs a command-and-control center, a mobile space platform where the Covenant fleet will rendezvous before their final jump to Earth.â

âWell, thereâs your ground,â Sergeant Johnson said. âOn this âelephantâ thing.â

Will got up and walked over to the data pad. âIt fits with the timetable. This station *is* on the way to Earth.â

Fred offered, âWe can drop out of Slipspace in a smaller craft. Go in andââ

âAnd do what you Spartans do best,â Locklear said. âInfiltrate, kill, and blow shit up. If thereâs room in this operation for an ODST, pencil me in.â

The Master Chief looked to the data pad, then to his team, Locklear, and the Sergeant. They were right: For the first time, theyâd know when and where the Covenant would be. If they hit the enemy hard enough, they could stop them before the Covenant hit Earthâ¦and delay Armageddon.

The Master Chief gave rapid-fire orders:

âFred, Will: Get Lindaâs suit back together ASAP.

âLocklear, youâre on weapons detail again. Scrounge every pistol, rifle, ammo bag, and scrap of explosives on this vessel and haul it to *Ascendant Justice*âs launch bay.

âGrace, Linda, and Sergeant Johnson: Get that Covenant dropship ready for its last flight. Reinforce the hull for a

Slipspace-to-normal-space transition.

âAnd Iâll take this plan to Admiral Whitcombâmake him see that itâs the only way. Weâre going to take this fight to the Covenant. Weâre going to launch a first strike.â

Chapter Thirty

0440 Hours, September 13, 2552 (Revised Date, Military Calendar) \ Aboard Hybrid Vessel *GettysburgâAscendant Justice,* Station-Keeping In Eridanus System.

Time was running out.

Dr. Halsey could feel the Covenant nearly upon them and her window of opportunity shrinking to a pinpoint. Only a few more things to take care of before she could goâbefore she started something she couldnât stop.

Someone approached the clean room, heavy footfalls that could only be a Spartan in MJOLNIR armor. Kelly appeared and waved from the other side of the glass partition that separated the clean room from the rest of Medical Four. Dr. Halsey buzzed her in.

âReporting for treatment, Doctor,â she said.

Kelly hesitated a moment as she glanced about at the unsterile environment the doctor had been working in: Styrofoam cups littered the surgical instrument trays, thermal printout paper curled from the biomonitorsâand the radiation-emitting crystal they had found on Reach sat on a nearby instrument tray.

âI thought that crystal was in the reactor room,â Kelly said. âBehind plenty of radiation shielding.â

âItâs perfectly safe,â Dr. Halsey said, âas long as weâre in normal space.â She picked up the crystal and slipped it carelessly into her lab coat pocket.

âLie down please, Kelly.â The doctor gestured to the contoured treatment chair. âJust a few more injections and weâre done with your burn therapy.â

Kelly sighed and eased herself onto the reclined chair.

Dr. Halsey removed a cloth covering a pair of injectors. She clicked them into the ports on Kellyâs MJOLNIR armor that threaded directly into her subclavian and femoral veins. âKeep doing your physical therapy, and the dermacortic steroids will remove most of the scarring and restore your full mobility within

another week,â she explained.

âA week?â Kelly growled and struggled to rise. âDoctor, I need to be one hundred percent ASAP. The Chief has a missionââ

Dr. Halsey activated the injectors, and they hissed their contents into Kellyâs body. She relaxed and slumped back on the table, unconscious.

âNo, Kelly,â Dr. Halsey whispered. âYouâre not going on the Chiefâs mission. Youâre going on mine.â

The sedative in her bloodstream would knock out an ODST in peak condition for the better part of a day. Halsey estimated that Kelly would be unconscious for a little more than two hours. By that time theyâd both be far enough along that thereâd be no turning back.

Dr. Halsey swiveled one of the displays to face her. She executed the memory-erase commandâwiping clean Cortanaâs recollection of the research they had done on old ONI lockdown codes. She folded the printout of their results and stuffed it into her pocket.

âCortana?â

âYes, Doctor?â she replied. Her voice through the roomâs speakers sounded distracted.

âLocate Corporal Locklear and have him report immediately, please.â

âDone, Doctor Halsey.â

âThank you, Cortana. That will be all.â She added in a whisper so low that only she heard: *âTake good care of them all for me.â*

Dr. Halsey adjusted the examination table so it lay flat, and then loaded medical supplies and equipment onto its undercarriage. She placed a bag with four submachine guns and sixteen full clips of ammunition on top of the supplies.

She found a lukewarm cup of stale coffee and gulped it down to the dregs.

Corporal Locklear appeared at the open entrance to the prep room. âHey, Doc. Cortana said you needed me?â he said tersely. He smoothed his hand over his shaved head. âIâm kind of busy right now, so if this can waitââ

âWhatever youâre doing,â Dr. Halsey told him, âthis is more important.â She nodded to Kellyâs prone form. âI need your help getting SPARTAN 087 to the launch bay.â

âIs she okay?â he asked and took a step toward her.

âSheâs fine, but I have to transfer her to the asteroid base. They have a piece of equipment necessary to complete her treatment.â

Locklear appeared unconvinced. âBut I just saw herââ

âSheâs fine,â Dr. Halsey assured him. âJust sedated. This procedure isâ¦unpleasant, even for a Spartan.â

Locklear looked into Dr. Halseyâs eyes and then nodded, accepting this explanation. He moved the head of the table and wheeled it through the doors, the med bay, and out into the waiting elevator.

Dr. Halsey followed on his heels.

When the elevator doors closed, she turned to the Corporal. âYour hand, please.â

He looked puzzled but held out his hand.

Dr. Halsey took it and turned it palm-up. She set the long, luminous blue artifact in his grasp. The light emitted by the alien artifact shone onto their faces and made the interior of the elevator colder. âThis is what the Covenant so desperately want. They tore up Reach to get it. They followed us into Slipspace. And Polaski died protecting this thing.â

She watched Locklear carefully, gauging his reaction, and saw that he pulled away slightly at this last remark; it had hit home.

âAnd what the hell am I supposed to do with it?â

âKeep it safe,â she told him. âGuard it with your life, because if the Covenant ever get it, theyâll be able to jump through Slipspace a hundred times faster than they can now. Do you understand?â

Locklear closed his large fist around the crystal. âNot really, Doc. But I can take care of it.â He paused and wrinkled his forehead in confusion. âBut why me? Why not ask one of your Spartans?â

ââMyâ Spartans,â Dr. Halsey replied in a whisper, âcould be ordered to hand it over to Lieutenant Haverson. And heâd risk getting it back to ONI Section Threeâeven if he had to gamble that the Covenant might get it.â

Locklear snorted. âWell, as much as I donât like El-Tee Whitebread, Iâd hand it over if ordered, too. Whatâs the big deal, anyway? Weâre almost home.â

âAlmost,â Dr. Halsey repeated, and she gave him a slight

smile. âBut the moment you jump, this crystal emits radiation like a signal flare. The Covenant will find this shipâ¦and maybe this time theyâll win the battle in Slipspace.â

Locklear grimaced.

She held his steely gaze a moment and then finally let go of his hand. âSo I know youâll do whatever it takes to prevent this object from falling into enemy hands.â

He nodded grimly. âI read you, Doc. Loud and clear.â There was a hint of respect in his voice. âI know what I have to doâ¦count on it.â

âGood,â she said.

The elevator doors parted. Locklear stuffed the crystal into his ammunition vest, and Locklear wheeled the table into the *Gettysburg*âs launch bay. âWhere do you want her?â

The bay was a beehive of activity: A hundred of Governor Jilesâs crew jogged to and from passages carrying data pad schematics and field multiscanners; robotic dollies carried fat Archer missiles, spiderlike Antilon mines, and slender pods of deuterium fuel for the *Gettysburg*âs auxiliary reactors; three Longsword fighter craft were being repaired; exoskeletons thudded along the deck, carrying plates of titanium and welding them in place.

âThere,â Dr. Halsey told Locklear. âTake her to that ship.â She pointed to Governor Jilesâs *Chiroptera*-class vessel. It sat on the deck looking like a sleeping bat. Its oddly angled stealth surfaces blended into the shadows.

Locklear shrugged and pushed the loaded gurney.

Dr. Halsey halted by the shipâs port hatch. It was sealed so tightly that no seam could be discerned.

She retrieved the thermal printout from her coat and rechecked its contents. She then touched a recessed button on the hull, and a tiny plate slid aside revealing an alphanumeric keyboard. Dr. Halsey typed in a long string and pressed ENTER.

The hatch parted with a hiss.

She smiled. âNot even Cortana could crack their crypto, indeed.â She waved Locklear inside.

Locklear obliged her and pushed the gurney into the ship. Dr. Halsey followed, secured the examination table, and escorted Locklear outside. She turned and headed back into the vessel.

He started back toward the elevator, then halted. âDoc, when

we were talkingâ¦you said when âyouâ jump to Slipspace. You meant when âweâ jump to Slipspace, didnât you?â

Dr. Halsey locked eyes with him for a moment. Then she touched a button inside the ship, and the hatch hissed closed between them.

âHurry,â the Admiral growled. âI donât want to get stuck without power when unfriendlies show up. I want to get under way to Earth. Weapons status?â

âAye, sir,â Cortana said. âPlasma turret one is obliterated; no possibility of repair. Plasma turrets two, three, and four are repaired, and although Iâm waiting for power to test them, I have run three hundred twelve virtual test-firings without incident. Turrets five, six, and seven, however, require parts Governor Jiles does not have in his inventory. Two Archer missile pods on the *Gettysburg* have been refilled. That gives us sixteen missiles hot and ready to go, sir.â

âIâd like to know where Jiles got those missiles,â Lieutenant Haverson muttered. âTheyâre UNSC military contraband.â

âHe is a *pirate*, Lieutenant,â Cortana said.

âGood work,â the Admiral told Cortana. âKeep me posted.â He turned toward the Chief. âYou had something, Master Chief?â

Before the Master Chief could speak his mind, Haverson said, âAdmiral.â He pointed at the forward screens and at the *Chiroptera*-class ship accelerating away from the *Gettysburg*âs launch bay. âI thought Jiles was staying on board to oversee repairs.â

âSo did I,â the Admiral said. âCortana, did you catch Jiles leaving on surveillance?â

âNo, sir, but you might be interested in this.â On the screen a grainy video appeared of Locklear, Dr. Halsey, and a Spartan on a gurney boarding the ship. âLocklear left them at the ship, sir. Doctor Halsey and SPARTAN 087 departed.â

âCortana,â the Admiral barked. âHail that ship. *Now*.â

âHailing.â

Governor Jiles appeared on forward screen number one. âAdmiral,â he said with a nervous smile. âI just saw my ship leave the launch bay. Perhaps you can explain why you commandeered my personal property when I have showed nothing but good faith in thisââ

âHold on to your shirttail, Governor,â Admiral Whitcomb snapped. âIâm in the middle of finding out who took your ship and what precisely is going on. Cortana, any response to our hail?â

âAn automated code, sir,â she said. Her mouth opened in astonishment. âUNSC Code Three-Nine-Two.â

âThree-Nine-Two?â the Admiral asked. He stared into space, trying to recall the obscure code.

The Master Chief cleared his throat and told him, âAdmiral, that is an official ânonresponseâ code, sir. Special Warfare teams use it to ignore hailsâ¦due to a higher-priority mission.â

âGod *damn* it.â The Admiralâs face flushed, and he ground his teeth. âYou mean the good doctor just told me to go to hell.â

On the forward screen the Chiroptera, its batlike wings nearly invisible against the black of space, accelerated in a sudden burst. Pinpoints of light appeared around the craft that elongated and smeared. The ship vanished.

âA Slipspace transition,â Cortana said.

âI thought you told me,â the Admiral said, slowly turning on Haverson, âthat that ship was locked down. That vital components were removed when it was decommissioned. That there was no way it could make a Slipspace jump?â

âYes, sir, I did.â

âAnd would you care to explain why that ship just disappeared, Lieutenant?â

âYes, Admiral. I was wrong,â Haverson replied without meeting the Admiralâs eyes. âDoctor Halsey apparently found a way to circumvent the ONI lockout on the shipâs systems.â

On screen, Jiles said, âThis is most unfortunate, Admiral. I expect to be compensatedââ

âYou bet itâs unfortunate,â Admiral Whitcomb said. âIf Iâd known there was a chance we could have used that ship to jump to Earthâ¦I would have done it an hour ago. Cortana, what was her trajectory?â

âNot Earth,â Cortana said. âDoctor Halseyâs course points to no known system in my database.â

The Admiral scrutinized the forward screens: Jilesâs face, the empty star field, and the frozen video of Dr. Halsey and Locklear in the launch bay. âI want Corporal Locklear on the bridge ten minutes ago. Lieutenant Haverson, have Cortana locate him. Then I want you *personally* to escort that ODST up here.â

Haverson swallowed. âYes, sir.â He marched to the elevator, and Cortana told him, âHeâs on B-Deck, Lieutenant, medical storage. Heâs not answering my COM page.â The elevator shut.

âChief, youâre on the Engineering console,â the Admiral said. âCover the NAV station, too.â

âYes, sir.â He moved to the Engineering stationâs monitors. There were thirty-five minutes to go on the shakedown cycle of the reactors and engines.

âContact,â Cortana said. âBearing zero-three-zero on the solar plane. Oneâcorrection, twoâCovenant cruisers. Theyâre not moving. Maybe they havenât spotted us.â

âIt never rains when it can monsoon,â the Admiral declared. âThey canât help but see us, Cortana, with all the radio chatter, ships, and leaking radiation. I bet theyâre just figuring out how best to kill us.â

Governor Jiles turned to someone off screen, and then said, âAdmiral Whitcomb, given this new development I would like to evacuate my people off the *Gettysburg* and out of harmâs way.â

âOf course, Governor. Do what you have to.â

The number three screen snapped off, and the stars reappeared.

âAnd Iâll do what I have to, too,â Admiral Whitcomb said. âCortana, halt the reactor and engine shakedown.â

âSir? There are risksââ

âI want them online *now*. Donât tell me what the risks are. Just do it.â

âYes, sir,â she said.

âMaster Chief, get this crate ready to move and stay on your toes. Weâll need every trick in the book to outmaneuver two cruisers.â

âAffirmative, Admiral.â The Chief observed the shakedown cycle halt and *Ascendant Justice*âs reactors restart. Radiation indicators redlined, and then dropped to a hairbreadthâ¦which was technically considered safe. The *Gettysburg*âs engines shuddered to life. The Chief felt the vibration though the deck half a kilometer away. âReactors are hot, sir,â he reported.

The Admiral watched as Jilesâs fleet of single ships and technicians in jet packs abandoned the *Gettysburg*, swarming across the dark of space back to the safety of their asteroid. âRats leaving a sinking ship?â he wondered aloud.

The Master Chief wasnât sure if that was a question directed at him, but he decided to reply anyway. âTheyâre just men who want to live, sir.â

The Admiral nodded.

âCovenant cruiser accelerating,â Cortana announced.

âBearing on a vector *out*-system. Itâs transitioning to Slipspace.â

âMaster Chief, get this tub moving. Now! Bring us up to half maximum speed.â

âAye, sir.â He tapped in commands. âAnswering one half forward.â The radiation warning on *Ascendant Justice*âs reactor flickered, but stabilized and subsided.

The combined mass of the two attached ships groaned as their recently repaired superstructures overcame their inertia.

âHeat up our plasma turrets, Cortana.â

âAye sâã Her translucent lavender hologram faded to ice blue. âSir, additional contacts at systemâs edge. Three. Noâadditional transitions from Slipspace; counting eighteenânow *thirty* Covenant ships of various classes. Positions zero-three-zero. Zero-nine-one, one-eight-zeroâ¦Sir, they have us enveloped.â

The star chart vanished in a wink, and a map of the Eridanus system appeared with tiny triangles representing Covenant ships now encircling the perimeter. The map turned to a side profile and revealed half a dozen additional ships scattered along the nadir and zenith of the system.

Admiral Whitcomb stared at the map and shook his head. âYou know the story of the Alamo, Chief?â

âYes, sir. A famous siege with a handful of defenders holding off overwhelming forces.â

The Admiral smiled. â*Texan* defenders, Chiefâthereâs a big difference. Colonel William Barrett Travis with one hundred fifty-five men held off more than two thousand Mexican invaders. They hunkered down inside a tiny fort and fought like wildcats. Travis got a handful of reinforcements laterâthirtytwo men.â The Admiralâs smile faded. âYou know there were fifteen civilians inside that fort, too?â He looked at the map again. âWell, when the fighting was over, Travis and his men were dead, but it cost the enemy six hundred lives.â

âLike the Battle of Thermopylae,â the Chief remarked.

âBut there were survivors at the Alamo; they let the civilians live.â He turned to the Chief. âYou think anyoneâs going to survive this fight? You think thereâs any way to win?â

The Master Chief tried to think of a way to fight and to win. Thirty Covenant ships against their damaged hybrid vessel. Add to that the need to defend Governor Jilesâs crew. Could he board one of the Covenant craft? Get Cortana to infiltrate their systems

and broadcast falsified orders? They would see him approaching. Or was there a blind spot he could approach from? How could he hide from the rest of the ships in their fleet, though? And by the time he could implement such a plan, the *Gettysburg* would be molten slag.

âIt was a rhetorical question, Chief,â the Admiral said.

âYes, sir,â the Chief replied. âGiven our situation, resources, and our enemyâs determination, then, no, I see no way to winâ¦or survive.â

âNeither do I.â Admiral Whitcomb stood straight. âCortana, get ready to jump. Chief, accelerate to flank speed course zero-five-five by two-nine-zero. Prepare to transition out of normal space on my mark.â

âAye, sir,â the Chief and Cortana answered in unison.

âWeâre leaving Governor Jiles and his people?â Cortana asked.

Admiral Whitcomb was silent a long moment, and then he replied, âWe are. This isnât the Alamo and Iâm not Colonel William Barrett Travis, although I dearly wish I were. No, weâre running. Weâre trading hundreds of lives for billions.â

The Master Chief absentmindedly reached for his belt pouch, and Dr. Halseyâs data crystals clinked. âIs this the right thing to do, sir?â

âThe right thing?â Admiral Whitcomb sighed. âHell, son, it probably isnât. Personally, Iâd prefer to fight, and die fighting, and take every one of those Covenant bastards with me. But I do not have the liberty to make that choice. My duty is clear: to protect the men and women of Earthânot a pack of privateers and outlaws.â He closed his eyes and said, âThe logic of the situation is also too damned clear. Even if we stay and fightâ¦theyâll all be just as dead.â

âCapacitors at full charge,â Cortana announced. âPreparing to enter Slipspace. Waiting for your order, sir.â

The Master Chief saw the energy from *Ascendant Justice*âs reactor drain to 5 percent. Motes of blue-green light appeared on the forward screen, and the stars stretched and smeared like watercolors.

But something was wrong: The shields of the Chiefâs MJOLNIR armor rippled. The radiation monitors spiked. Where was it coming from?

âHundreds for billions,â the Admiral whispered. âDuty be damnedâ¦Iâm still going to burn in hell for this.â Admiral Whitcomb inhaled deeply and closed his eyes.

âGo, Cortana. Get us out of here. And God forgive me.â

deck five meters to the ceiling. He played his flashlight over the uneven surfaces. He spied a desk and terminal in the corner.

âHello, inventory control,â he said. âThe place to go for goodies in any Navy outfit.â He strode to the desk, sat down, and tapped in a search for medicinal-grade ethyl alcohol.

A tone chimed in his earpiece, and Cortanaâs voice said, âCorporal Locklear, I have an urgent request from Admiralââ

Locklear squelched his COM. âEnough chatter, lady,â he murmured. âThe bar just opened.â

The location for MED34-CH_3CH_2OH popped on screen.

âB-I-N-G-O,â he sang.

Locklear jumped up. âCome on, amigo. You and me are going to throw a party.â

The deck lurched under Locklearâs feet. âWhat the?â¦Weâre moving?â He turned the inventory display to face him and tap ped in a command to switch to external camera mode.

Craggy asteroids moved past themâno, it was the *Gettysburg* that was moving. Locklear squinted and saw a flash of blue. He magnified that part of the screen and found a dozen blurry blue flares from engine cones and the pulsing lateral lines filled with plasma. Covenant ships.

âAh hell,â he said and backed away from the desk. âSo much for happy hour.â

Something moved in his vest. Locklear reached in his pocket and pulled out the crystal Dr. Halsey entrusted to his care. The elongated stone rippled, facets moved and rearranged like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

He spied the same blue color on the inventory monitorâpinpricks of stretched space, the first indication of a Slipspace jump.

âIâm not going through another Slipspace fight,â Locklear said through gritted teeth. âIâm not going to let them follow us. Or let this thing shoot off a signal flare to every Covenant ship in the galaxy.â

He grabbed a can of C-7 off the dolly and dropped Dr. Halseyâs crystal on the deck. He quickly covered the thing with the foaming explosive. It hardened to a stiff resin in a matter of seconds. Locklear grabbed a detonator, inserted it into the foam, and connected it to a timer.

Why had the doc given him this to guard? She said because

the ONI spooks wouldnât have the guts to get rid of it if they had toâ¦would maybe even let it fall into Covenant hands. That made sense, but, at the same time, there was something not quite right with that explanation.

Locklear looked at the monitor and the pinpoints of light that now almost blotted out the stars.

Screw it.

He had his own reasons to blow this thing upâlike not wanting to die in another space battle. Like maybe getting some payback for Polaskiâs death. The Covenant rat-bastards wanted it so bad? Well, screw them, too.

âThis oneâs for you, Polaski,â he whispered.

Locklear set the timer for three seconds, and punched the countdown. He dived for cover behind the robotic dolly and covered his head.

The brilliant flash of sapphire light was the last thing he ever saw.

Section VI
Operation: First Strike

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Chapter Thirty-One

0510 Hours, September 13, 2552 (Revised Date, Military Calendar) \ Aboard Hybrid Vessel *GettysburgâAscendant Justice*, In Slipspace.

The Master Chief and his team, which now consisted of Grace, Linda, Will, and Fred, had been ordered to report to the Officersâ Clubânormally forbidden territory to NCOs. Of course, nothing about their circumstances had been normal for a long, long time.

The *Gettysburg*âs O-Club had a massive table of oak, scored with numerous gouges and scorches from a hundred cigars casually set upon its surface. There was a bar stocked with bottles containing a rainbow collection of liquors, dusted with shattered crystal. The roomâs walnut-paneled walls were polished to a rich glow. Hung along those walls was the UNSC gold-fringed blue flag. There were also gold and silver citation plaques for meritorious gallantry. There were photos of officers and past Captains of the *Gettysburg*. And most interesting to the Master Chief were tin Civil War daguerreotypes that displayed battle-fields full of charging men and cavalry and cannons belching flash and thunder.

Admiral Whitcomb and Sergeant Johnson entered the room. The Spartans snapped to rigid attention. âOfficer on deck!â the Master Chief shouted, and they all saluted.

âAt ease,â Admiral Whitcomb said. âPlease sit down.â

The Master Chief stepped forward. âWith respect, these chairs will not support the weight of our gear, Admiral.â

âOf course,â the Admiral said. âWell, make yourselves as comfortable as you can. This is an informal meeting.â He snorted. âI just wanted to see who was left on board and alive.â He looked past the open doors to the Officersâ Club. âLieutenant Haverson will join us shortly. Heâs investigating the site of Corporal Locklearâsâ¦accident.â

A holographic projector pad upon the bar flickered to life, and Cortanaâs slender body appeared. Chunks of broken crystal on the pad refracted the light and distorted her image so she appeared half melted and cast prismed arcs of light onto the walls.

Sergeant Johnson stepped over to the bar and swept the pad clean.

âThank you, Sergeant,â Cortana said, looking over her

restored figure.

âMy pleasure,â he replied with a grin.

Cortana faced the Admiral. âSir,â she said, âyouâll be happy to hear that Iâm detecting no signals, residual radiation, or any transient contactsâ¦which is precisely what you would expect from a *normal* Slipspace journey.â

Admiral Whitcomb nodded, sighed, and eased into one of the leather-backed chairs at the tableâs head. âWell, thatâs one small blessing.â

âAnd hereâs evidence that Doctor Halseyâs crystal was indeed destroyed,â Lieutenant Haverson said as he entered the room. He paused to seal the door behind him.

Haverson sat next to the Admiral and set a small plastic bag flat on the table. âI found Locklear exactly where Cortana said he would be: B-Deck, the medical storage room. Overloaded electronics at the site are consistent with a high-energy radiation burstâ¦as are the burns on the Corporalâs body.â

He grimaced and added, âIf it means anything, his death was quick. And theseââhe tapped the plastic bag on the tableââare crystalline fragments that I found at the site. At first glance they appear to be a match to the shard found on Reach.â He shook his head. âBut what I found isnât sufficient mass to account for the entire crystal. So unless it was atomized and left no trace, a fact inconsistent with the presence of these larger pieces, then the rest of that crystal has to be somewhere else.â

Cortana tapped her foot, and one of her eyebrows arched. âIf the radiation burst detected before our jump correlates with the destruction of Doctor Halseyâs crystal,â she said, âthen there is an alternative explanation. The timing between that explosion and the radiation flare was only forty-seven milliseconds. Since the crystal had unusual space-and time-bending properties, the missing fragments may have been âsqueezedâ out of the ship and into Slipspace.â

Haverson asked incredulously, âYou mean pieces of the greatest scientific discovery in human history areââhe nodded past the walls of the *Gettysburg*ââlost in Slipspace?â

âYes,â Cortana replied. She shrugged. âIâm sorry, Lieutenant.â

âAt least the Covenant canât get to it anymore,â Admiral Whitcomb said. He flicked the plastic bag with his thick finger.

âOr if they do, theyâre only going to find a bunch of busted fragments.â

âI just wish I knew why Locklear did it,â Haverson said.

Everyone was quiet. John and the other Spartans shifted uneasily in their heavy MJOLNIR armor.

Sergeant Johnson cleared his throat. âThe boy was a little on edge. After all heâd been through, youâd expect that. But he was an ODSTâtough as nails and twice as sharp and used to getting pounded. He wouldnât crack. He had a reason.â

âDoctor Halsey,â Haverson remarked and narrowed his eyes. âShe had to have set this up.â

John started to defend Dr. Halsey, but he stopped himself from arguing with an officer. Yes, her actions were inexplicable: She had exfiltrated Kelly, left them when they needed her the most, and given Locklear the alien artifact. John still wanted to trust her, though. Perhaps whatever she was up to was for the greater good.

âLetâs not start this,â the Admiral said. âI donât want anyoneâs perceptions colored by us discussing the âwhysâ and âwhat ifsâ of this situation. Save it for the debriefing theyâre going to give us when we get back.â He cast a sideways glance at the bar and unconsciously smacked his lips. âFrom here to Earth it should be smooth sailing, and we can finally relax.â

âPermission to speak, Admiral,â the Chief said.

âGranted. Speak your mind.â

âI donât wish to contradict you, sir, but perhaps it shouldnât be smooth sailing. And maybe we shouldnât relax.â

Admiral Whitcomb leaned forward. âI have a feeling Iâm not going to like thisâ¦but explain yourself, Chief.â

The Master Chief outlined his mission plan, how he and his team would take a Covenant dropship and insert into the rendezvous location for the invading Covenant fleet. They would then infiltrate their command-and-control center, the *Unyielding Hierophant*, and destroy it; that would hopefully cripple the Covenant forceâ¦or at least slow them down. Maybe even enough to buy Earth time to reinforce their defenses.

The Admiral stared at the Chief without blinking and flatly replied, âMission request denied.â

âAcknowledged, sir.â He remained standing, at stiff attention.

Whitcomb frowned, as the other Spartans also snapped to

attention and remained stone-still. He sighed.

âI understand your motivations, Chief. I do. But I will not risk transporting your team to the Covenant rendezvous point,â the Admiral explained. âIf we lose this ship, Earth never gets its warning.â

âSir,â the Master Chief replied, âwe will transition from Slipspace to normal space alone. Once the dropship clears the gravitational influence of the *Gettysburg* and the *Ascendant Justice*, the Slipspace field will deteriorate and we will enter normal space. You need never even stop. And only a minor course correction puts the *Gettysburg* on the correct trajectory.â

âHas a drop out of Slipspace ever been attempted in a ship so small?â the Admiral asked. His heavy brows knitted together.

âYes, sir,â Cortana said. âOur Slipspace probes perform the maneuver all the time, but the shearing stress and radiation are considerable.â She paused and looked toward John. âThe Spartans, however, in the MJOLNIR armor should be able to survive.â

ââShould,ââ the Admiral echoed, his face grim. âAs much as I admire your daring, Chief, I still have to deny your request. Youâll need Cortana to get past the Covenant security systems. She has to make it to Earth. With the data sheâs carrying on Halo, the Flood, and Covenant technology, sheâs far too valuable to risk.â

âUnderstood, sir,â John replied. âI hadnât considered that.â

Haverson slowly stood and brushed the sleeves of his tattered uniform. âIâll volunteer to go on the Master Chiefâs mission,â he said. âI have extensive training in cryptology and Covenant systems.â

Admiral Whitcomb narrowed his eyes and reexamined the Lieutenant as if seeing him for the first time.

âYouâd never survive the Slipspace transition,â Cortana told him. âButâ¦â She tapped her lip with her forefinger, deep in thought. âThere might be another way.â

Covenant icons entered the stream of symbols flowing along the surface of her holographic body. âI discovered a file-duplication algorithm in the Covenant AI on *Ascendant Justice*. I successfully used it to reproduce my language-translation routines. I might use it to copy portions of my infiltration programming into the memory-processing matrix in the Master

Chiefâs MJOLNIR armor. It wonât be a full copyâthere are replication errors and other side effectsâbut it would give the Spartan team access to some of my capabilities. Enough, I think, to get them through the Covenant security barriers.â

Admiral Whitcomb sighed deeply. He stood, went to the bar, and then returned to the table carrying a bottle of whiskey and three intact crystal tumblers. âI assume you Spartans wonât join me in a drink?â

âNo, sir,â John replied, answering for his team. âThank you, sir.â

The Admiral set glasses before Haverson, the Sergeant, and himself. But before he poured, he set the bottle down and shook his head as if a drink were suddenly the last thing he wanted. âYou realize, Chief, that you and your team will be on your own? That my first, my only priority, must be to get to Earth?â

âMy team is willing to accept the risk,â the Chief said.

âThe risk?â the Admiral whispered. âItâs a one-way ticket, son. But if youâre willing to do it, if you can slow the Covenant assault on Earth, then, hell, it might be worth the trade.â

The Chief had no reply to this. He and his Spartans had survived against impossible odds before. Yet the Admiral was right: There seemed to be something final about this missionâ¦something that told John he wouldnât make it. That was acceptable. The cause more than justified the sacrifice of five when measured against billions of lives on Earth.

Admiral Whitcomb stood and said, âVery well, Master Chief. Mission request approved.â

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The Master Chief parked the groaning overloaded robotic dolly next to the side hatch of the Covenant dropship. The dolly held four tons of carbon-molybdenum steel I-beams.

Will unloaded the cargo and hauled it inside, where Fred and the Sergeant cross-braced and welded the beams in place.

This was the final reinforcement for the dropship. The interior of the craft was so cramped that two armored Spartans could barely pass one another.

They had welded layers of lead, boron fibers, and Titanium-A hull plates they had removed from the *Gettysburg*. According to Cortanaâs calculations, this was the only way to give them better

than fiftyâfifty odds of emerging from a Slipspace transition with an intact ship.

Admiral Whitcomb monitored the display of a computer repair cart, then looked up and said, âCortana is ready for you, Chief.â He waved him over.

The Chief marched to the cart and let the Admiral hook up the interface to the base of his neck. âThis should feel just like a normal download,â he said.

Chilled mercury filled Johnâs mind just like it always did when Cortana entered and fused with his thoughts. This presence, however, warmed too quickly, as if it were just thin ice melting against his bodyâs heat. It was like a recollection of Cortana inside his headânot the real thing.

âInitializing MJOLNIR armor systems check and subroutine unpacking protocols,â Cortanaâs voice whispered.

At the same time, the real Cortana also spoke over the COM: âDonât listen to her. Sheâs only half the woman she used to be.â

âAs long as you only copied the good parts,â the Chief replied.

âIâm all good,â Cortana replied tersely. âJust donât get too used to a passenger you can order around.â

âI wouldnât dream of it.â

âSystems check complete,â the copied Cortana whispered. âAll systems are functional.â

Linda approached the opposite side of the Covenant dropship; a robot dolly followed stacked with rifles, Lotus antitank mines, explosives, and crates of ammunition. She angled the dolly and led it up the loading ramp until it butted against the hull.

Fred emerged from inside, and Linda handed him an armful of submachine guns.

The Master Chief detected a slight limp to her stride and an almost imperceptible awkwardness to her usual fluid motions.

He opened a private COM channel to Linda. âWhatâs your status? Are you fit?â

She shrugged. This gesture was notoriously difficult to perform in MJOLNIR armor with its force-multiplying circuits. It took a degree of concentration and dexterity that spoke volumes about Lindaâs true coordination.

âDoctor Halsey would say I needed a monthâs bed rest,â she wryly replied. âBut Iâm squared away, Chief. I still have this.â

She picked her sniper rifle off the dolly and slung it over her shoulder with a liquid grace. âAnd I still have this.â She patted her helmet. âEven though the Covenant did their best to shoot it off last time.â She stepped closer to him. âI can take care of myself. And I can take care of the teamâs back. Iâve never let you down, sir. I donât plan on doing so now.â

He nodded.

What John wanted to do, however, was order her to stay behind. But heâd need her uncanny skill with the sniper rifle on this mission. Heâd need her so they could survive just long enough to stop the Covenant.

If he could have accomplished this mission alone, he would have made everyone on Blue Team stay. His team, however, knew the risks and knew the payoff for their sacrifice. It was as good a final fate as any soldier could ask for.

He marched to the other hatch on the dropship and boarded the craft. There was one last detail to take care of with Lieutenant Haverson. John moved past Sergeant Johnson who, obscured by a shower of sparks, welded the last supporting I-beam in place.

The Lieutenant sat in the cockpit checking the automated routines that Cortana had uploaded into the system. These would generate the proper coded responses to Covenant queries. They had also changed the dropshipâs registry tag so the Covenant would not recognize this ship as belonging to the now renegade *Ascendant Justice*.

âLieutenant,â the Master Chief said. âForgive the interruption.â

Haverson looked up and slicked the sweat-drenched hair from his face. âWhat can I do for you, Chief?â

The Master Chief eased into the copilotâs seat. âDr. Halsey gave me something to pass on to ONI Section Three: her analysis on the Flood.â

Haversonâs eyebrows shot up.

He opened his belt compartmentâ¦and hesitated. Which data crystal? The one only containing Dr. Halseyâs Flood analysis and possible inoculation? Or the one containing the source files for her conclusions, the one she said would kill Sergeant Johnson?

While John felt justified in gambling his life and the lives of the other Spartans, that was his choice as their commander to

make. That wasnât the case for the Sergeant.

It was a biological fluke that had spared the Sergeant from the Flood. A one-in-a-billion shot, the doctor had said. But it was a billion-to-one shot that he could save billions of lives. So the mathematics of the situation were almost even.

What had Dr. Halsey said about saving every person, no matter what the cost?

NoâJohn had sworn an oath to protect all of humanity. His duty was clear. He reached for the crystal containing the complete files and handed it to Lieutenant Haverson. âShe said it would help fight the Flood, sir. Iâm not exactly sure what she meant.â

âWeâll see, Chief. Thank you.â Haverson took the crystal and peered into its depths. He shrugged. âWith Doctor Halsey, who can tell?â

The COM channel clicked, and Cortana announced, âTen minutes until we reach the drop zone. Make final preparations to launch Blue Team. Youâll only get one shot at this.â

âRoger that, Cortana,â the Chief replied. âSpartans, on deck!â

Haverson tentatively extended his hand. âI guess this is it, Chief.â

The Chief gently shook the Lieutenantâs hand. âGood luck, sir.â

John moved back though the dropshipâalmost running over Sergeant Johnson, who was dragging the arc welder down the gangway.

âAllow me, Sergeant.â John grasped the two-hundred-kilogram machine and lifted it with one hand.

The Master Chief exited the dropship, and he and the other Spartans assembled outside. He stowed the arc welder and took his position at the head of the Spartan formation.

Admiral Whitcomb looked them over once and then said, âIâd wish you luck, Master Chief, but you Spartans seem to make your own luck. So let me just say Iâll see you all when this is over.â

He saluted them and they returned the salute.

âJust one last order,â the Admiral said.

âSir?â

âGive âem hell.â

Chapter Thirty-Two

0530 Hours, September 13, 2552 (Revised Date, Military Calendar) \ Aboard Captured Covenant Dropship, In Slipspace.

The dropship rolled, inverted, and spun out of control. It tumbled and pitched, and one of the I-beams solidly welded to the hull bucked and snapped.

The Spartans of Blue Team were strapped to the hull in quick-release harnesses. No one, however, gave any thought to the red quick-release button in the center of their chests. They were all hanging on for their lives.

The forward monitor was black because there was nothing for them to see in Slipspace. The only light inside the dropship came from chemical light sticks activated and tossed inside before they departed. Those plastic sticks had cracked, and their luminous contents had balled into a million microscopic blobs in the zero gee.

Although the hydrostatic gel inside his MJOLNIR armor had been pressurized to its maximum safe value, Johnâs bones still felt as if they were being shaken apart.

This violent ride started when they had cleared *Ascendant Justice*âs launch bay and entered the inky void of Slipspace. This ânormalâ Slipspace was nothing like John had experienced before. Without the smoothing effect of Dr. Halseyâs alien crystalâthis ride was a thousand times worse.

Radiation levels spiked and dippedâ¦but so far the dosages getting into the lead-lined dropship were survivable.

âNow I know,â Linda said, âwhy only big ships travel through Slipspace.â

âYou know those SS probes?â Fred asked. âTheyâre almost solid Titanium-A.â

The Master Chief checked his teamâs biosigns: erratic but still within normal operational parameters. Graceâs heart skipped a beat or two, but then returned to a normal strong rhythm. No broken bones or signs of internal bleeding yet, either. It was also a good sign that Blue Team were reasonably calm about their

dire situation. The Chief knew it was all they could do until they cleared the Slipspace field generated by *Ascendant Justice*.

He ran a diagnostic on his MJOLNIR shields. They still recharged faster than they were drained by the ambient radiation that stormed invisibly around them. He wished the real Cortana were with him. She would have said something to distract him.

âStatus?â John asked.

Four blue acknowledgment lights winked on, and four Spartans gave him thumbs-up signals.

Fred chimed in, âThis isnât so bad. The last insertion I made, we hit the ground before the dropship. Now, *that* was a rough ride. We wereââ

The dropship lurched violently and cut off Fredâs story.

Cracks appeared along the armor welded to the port wall. Molten lead oozed from the rupture.

Despite the hydrostatic gel and the padding, a jolt slammed the Master Chiefâs head against the front of his helmet with force enough to make black stars explode in his eyes. Another jolt slammed his head into the back of his helmet. The inside of the dropship went entirely dark.

Â

âChief? Chief?â Cortanaâs voice whispered through his helmet speaker. âChief, respond please.â

Johnâs vision came into focus. His biosigns sluggishly pulsed on his heads-up display. Beyond the display, it was completely dark. He activated his external lights and pointed his head along the interior of the dropship.

His Spartans hung limp in their harnesses. Aside from spheres of lead that had melted under the hull armor, resolidified, and now floated like champagne bubbles in the interior of the vessel, there was no other discernible motion.

âWe made it?â

âAffirmative,â the cloned Cortana answered. âIâm picking up a tremendous volume of Covenant COM traffic on the F-through K-bands. Theyâve pinged us three times already for a response, Chief. Awaiting orders.â

âHow can you pick up any signal inside this lead-lined hull?â

âThe hull is breached in many sections, Chief. The COM

traffic is also unusually strong, indicating extremely close proximity of Covenant forces.â

âStand by,â he told her. He hit the quick release on his harness and floated free. He called up Blue Teamâs biosigns and found them all unconscious, but alive. He grabbed a first-aid kit, injected them each with a mild stimulant, and released them from their safety restraints.

âWhere are we?â Will asked.

The Master Chief looked instinctively to the forward monitors, but they were dead. âThereâs only one way to find out,â he replied. âIâll take the portside hatch. Fred, youâre on the starboard.â

âRoger, Blue-One,â Fred replied.

The Chief rotated the manual release of the hatch and it eased open. Beyond was the velvet black of space, filled with stars that shone yellow and amber and red. He clipped a tether onto his suit and then onto the hull and leaned out the hatch.

As Cortana had indicated, there were Covenant forces in close proximity. A cruiser glided silently past them three hundred meters away. All John could see was its silver-blue hull, its plasma turrets with their lateral lines aglow with fire, and the flare of its engine cones as it passedâ¦and then John saw the rest of them.

There were Covenant cruisers and larger carriers; there were even bigger vessels with five bulbous sections that were two kilometers stem to stern and had a dozen deadly energy projectors. Motes of dust swirled between the numerous ships: Seraph fighters, dropships, and tentacled Engineer pods.

âHow many ships,â he asked Cortana, âare we looking at?â

âTwo hundred forty-seven warships,â she replied. âEstimation of the total population based on the sampling from your limited field of vision puts that total number at more than five hundred Covenant warships.â

For the first time the Chief froze; his gauntlets locked onto the edge of the hatch, and his arms failed to respond. Five hundred ships? This fleet would easily overwhelm any UNSC defensive forceâwhether or not the Admiral got through with his warning. Their opening salvo would be a tidal wave of plasma, and it would obliterate Earthâs orbital fortresses before they could fire a shot.

A thousand kilometers below, space rippled, parted, and seven more cruisers appeared in normal space. They maneuvered to join the rest of the pack.

John realized that the last time he had seen this magnitude of destructive power had been Halo. The ring was a weapon designed to kill all sentient life for dozens of light-years in every direction.

And he had stopped that threat. He could stop this one, too. He had to.

His plan called for the infiltration and destruction of their command-and-control station. But how would that stop this gathering of force? It wouldnâtâ¦but it might buy Earth enough time to come up with a plan to counter this seemingly invincible armada.

âYou said theyâve pinged us three times?â John asked Cortana.

âAffirmative. Theyâve been curious about our status, but not as much as you might expect. Thereâs a tremendous amount of COM traffic. Theyâre probably only interested in us as a navigation hazard.â

âSend a signal and explain that our engines are crippled and weâll need assistance to move. Letâs see if we can get them to take us to this central station for repairs.â

âSending message now.â

The Master Chief piped what he was seeing to Blue Team. âTime to wake up,â he said. âArmor and weapons check on the double.â

There was a pause of several seconds before Blue Teamâs acknowledgment lights pulsed in his HUD. He knew they were having the same reaction of fear, and then drawing the same conclusion as he had about their mission. They couldnât fail: The fate of humanity lay in their hands.

John angled his head around to take a look at the dropship.

The majority of the dropshipâs hull had peeled away, and lead and titanium plates underneath showed through. Without their reinforcements, the craft would have disintegrated on the rough ride through Slipspace.

âCovenant C & C responding to our request,â the copied Cortana informed him. âFerry en route to take us in for repairs. They were a little confused about which warship we belong to,

but I simulated static to cover our shipâs registration ID. Theyâre too busy to take too close a look at us.â

The Master Chief returned inside the dropship. âWeâre getting towed,â he told Blue Team.

Linda came up to him and made a circle in the air with her index finger. John nodded and turned around so she could visually inspect his MJOLNIR suit. Computer diagnostics were fine, but his Spartans didnât take any chances with their armor. Especially not in an evacuated environment.

âYouâre good,â she told him.

John then returned the favor and examined her suit. Fred and Will had done an excellent job integrating the replacement parts into Lindaâs armor. Aside from their pristine condition, they were a perfect match.

He patted her on the shoulder and gave her a thumbs-up to indicate that her armor was in working order.

âOrdnance load out,â Grace said and unraveled the duffel bags they had tied to the hull. The packages had been wrapped with lead foil, layers of thermal padding, and then a layer of utility tape. âHeavy or light?â she asked.

âWe go in heavy,â John said. âExcept Linda.â

Linda started to object, but he explained, âWeâll need you to hang back and cover us with your sniper rifle. I want you fast and deadly. Take a close-range weapon, extra ammo, and whatever you need to keep your sniper rifle working in the field.â

âRoger,â Linda said. Her voice was cold, hard, and brittle. This was the voice John had heard as she reported in while sniping targets around the team. John sometimes found it a little too coldâ¦but he knew this was a good sign. Linda was preparing to do what she did best: kill with a single shot.

âThe rest of us will take whatever we can carry. Once weâre in I have a feeling we wonât be able to come back. If we have to, we can always lighten our load.â

The Chief grabbed a battle rifle and, for close use, a pair of submachine guns. He took a pair of silencers for the SMGs and hip holsters for the smaller weapons. He picked up a dozen frag grenades in their plastic ring carrier and slotted that into the left thigh section of his armor.

Heâd need ammunition, a lot of it, if things got hot. So he

took extra clips for the SMGs and the battle rifle and taped them onto his chest, arms, and right thigh. More clips went into a backpack, along with two Lotus antitank mines, a few cans of C-7 explosive, detonators, timers, two field first-aid kits, and a fiber-optic probe.

While the rest of Blue Team got their gear together, John told them, âStay off the COM from now on.â

They all nodded.

Lead lining or not, they were close to too many listening Covenant ears to take any more chances with the COM.

He moved to the still-open port hatch, slid the fiber-optic probe outside, and plugged it into his helmet. Grainy images appeared on his heads-up display.

Hundreds of Covenant ships swarmed into view. In their midst a speck glowed and grew larger until the Master Chief saw it was a ship of similar design to their own: two U-shaped hulls, each the size of their dropship, sat on top of one another. This ship accelerated toward them and separatedâone part moved to their dropshipâs stern and the other drifted to the nose.

The clanging of metal on metal reverberated through the hull, and the Master Chief felt a gentle motion in the pit of his stomach.

He looked back and passed on a thumbs-up to Fred, indicating that their tow had arrived, and Fred passed this signal on to the rest of the team.

On the fiber-optic feed the Master Chief saw that the Covenant tug maneuvered them through the fleet, up, over, and around ships a hundred times their size. There was a moment when they dived and there was nothing on screen save the stars and black of space. The Master Chief got a glimpse of the gold-colored star on his heads-up display, and then the video feed moved over to a planet of ocher smeared with clouds of sulfur dioxide and an orbiting moon of silver.

The tug turned to face a new ship in the distance. This vessel looked like two teardrop-shaped Covenant ships that had collided, giving the result an overall elongated figure-eight geometry.

They moved toward this ship, and the Master Chief made out more details. Spokes radiated from the narrow midpoint of the vessel and connected to a slender ring that he hadnât seen before

because they had approached facing it edge-on. Featherlike tubes extended from either bulbous section and moved slowly over that central wheel. John squinted to make out more details on this unusual ship, but he was already at maximum resolution.

It had a ring? Was it rotating? But the Covenant had gravitational technology. They didnât need rotating sections to simulate gravity.

Then he saw *something* recognizable on the structure: tiny ships docked to that ring. Covenant cruisers and carriers. There must have been sixty connected to the central hub.

The titanic perspective of this structure clicked into place. The carriers looked like toys. The twin teardrop shapes had to be thirty kilometers end to end. This could only be the Covenant command-and-control center, the *Unyielding Hierophant*.

The tug moved directly toward the station. It was precisely where they had to go, so it was a lucky breakâ¦but ironically, it was also the last place the Master Chief wanted to be.

There was no telling what kind of sensors the *Unyielding Hierophant* had, but they couldnât take chances. John retreated into the dropship and eased the hatch shut.

He moved deeper into the ship and waited with the rest of Blue Team.

Three minutes ticked by on his mission clock; John tried to control his breathing and focus his mind.

Gravity settled his stomach, and there was a series of metallic clatters along the hull. Atmosphere hissed in though the cracks of their breached ship.

John pointed at Fred and Grace and then to the starboard hatch. They leveled their rifles and moved. He pointed to Linda and himself, then the port hatch, and they also moved into position.

John wasnât sure what kind of reception waited for them on the other side of those hatches, but one thing was certainâtheyâd have to face it head-on. There was nowhere to hide inside the reinforced and too-cramped interior of their dropship.

The port hatch cracked and squeaked open.

Linda and John aimed their rifles.

Chapter Thirty-Three

0610 Hours, September 13, 2552 (Revised Date, Military Calendar) \ Aboard Covenant Battle Station *Unyielding Hierophant*.

A rubbery tentacle reached in along the seam of the dropshipâs hatch.

John raised his hand and signaled Linda to stand down. He recognized the alien limbâthe splitting cilia feelers and globular sensory organs could belong only to a Covenant Engineer.

The Engineer pushed open the hatch and entered the ship, floating past John and Linda as if they werenât there. It chittered and squawked as it ran its tentacles over the foreign armor plates and spatters of lead. Two more Engineers bolted through the open hatch and joined the first.

As long as they left the single-minded aliens to their work, they wouldnât raise an alarm. But what else was out there?

John eased against the frame of the hatch and slid the fiber-optic probe outside. There was a line of dropships, Seraph fighters, and other singleships that stretched away into the shadows. Swarms of Engineers, thousands of the creatures, hovered and drifted throughout the area. They moved parts, disassembled and reassembled sections of ship hulls, and plumbed plasma coils. There was no trace of a welcome party of Elites waiting for Blue Team.

John turned the optic probe up and saw a latticework deck overhead with tools, welders, and spotlights hanging like jungle vines. It was as good a place as any to get their bearings.

John turned and pointed at Linda and Will, then out the hatch and up. They nodded and moved out.

Five seconds later acknowledgment lights from Blue Four and Three winked on. It was safe for the rest of them.

John grabbed the upper lip of the hatchway and flipped up onto the top of the dropship. He grabbed a dangling cord and pulled himself onto the latticework deck where Fred and Linda perched, watching and making sure the bay was clear.

Grace and Fred disembarked and scrambled silently up into

the darkness, joining them.

John pointed two fingers at his eyes and then made a flat fan motion across the space of the bay. The Spartans moved to carefully scan the area.

From his shadowy overview John saw that this place was a repair-and-refit facility, with slots for hundreds of singleships. The room curved out of view three hundred meters in either direction. It must run the circumference of the stationâs hub.

Apart from the thousands of busy Engineers, John spotted only two Grunts wearing white methane-breather masks. It was not a color designation he had seen before. They pushed carts containing barrels of sloshing fluids. They would be easy to avoid.

One side of the bay had a series of sealed doors that he presumed led to airlocks. The opposite wall of the bay had a meter-thick window through which poured an intense blue light.

Every thirty meters along that transparent wall was a recessed alcove. Overflowing from the nearest alcove were purple polyhedral cargo barrels, old charred plasma coils, and plates of the silver-blue Covenant alloy. But what piqued Johnâs interest was what was next to this pile of junk: a holographic terminal.

John clicked his COM to get Blue Teamâs attention, pointed to the junk pile, held up two fingers, and then pointed again at the alcove.

Everyone nodded, understanding his order.

Fred and Linda silently dropped to the deck, ran across the bay, and melted into the shadows behind a cut section of hull. Grace followed.

John looked up and down and side to side across the bay, making sure no Grunts were visible. He and Will crossed and took cover behind a plasma coil the size of a Warthog light reconnaissance vehicle.

He used both hands to point at Fred and Linda, turned his hands so they pointed to himself, and then nodded to the data terminal.

Linda lay flat and slithered to the edge of the alcove shadows on his right; Fred took the left. They would cover him while he moved to the terminal.

John reached to the back of his neck and pulled Cortanaâs chip from his skull. He crawled on his stomach, hugging the wall

until he got to the terminal. He slid Cortanaâs chip into the input slot and then eased back into the shadows.

âIâm in,â Cortana reported over the COM. âI have secured our own channel and encrypted the signal so weâre free to use the interteam COM.â

âGood work,â John told her. âIs there a central reactor in this station? How well defended is it?â

âStand by. I have to move carefully. There are Covenant security AIs in this system.â

John hoped that this copy of Cortanaâs infiltration routines was as good as the real Cortana.

âI have schematics for the station,â she told him. âThe good news is, each lobe has a central reactor complex with five hundred twelve-terawatt units similar in design to the pinch fusion reactors on their ships. Apparently this energy is used to power a shield generator that can repel the collision of a small moon. I can overload one reactor, causing the melting of its field coils, which will saturate the surroundingââ

âWill it explode?â John asked impatiently.

âYesâan explosion of sufficient force to vaporize both sections.â

âThatâs the good news? Whatâs the bad?â

âThe reactorâs control system is isolated. I cannot reach it from this terminal. You will have to physically deliver me there.â

âWhere is âthereâ?â

âThe nearest reactor-control access point is seven kilometers farther into the stationâs top lobe.â

John considered this. If they were careful and lucky, it might be possible.

âIs there a way to leave you in the central system until we need you?â he asked. âIt would be handy to have you monitor the Covenant security systems.â

The duplicate Cortana was silent a full three seconds. âThere is a way,â she finally replied. âWhen I was copied from the original Cortana, the duplicating software was copied as wellâit becomes an inseparable part of all subsequent copies. I can use this to copy myself into this system.â

âPerfect.â

âThere are risks, however,â Cortana told him. âEach successive copy contains aberrations that I cannot correct. There

may be unforeseen complications associated with using a copy of a copy.â

âDo it,â John ordered. âIâll take that chance. But Iâm not willing to take a chance on crossing seven kilometers behind enemy lines without a way to bypass their security systems.â

âStand by,â Cortana said. âWorking.â

A minute ticked off Johnâs mission timer. Then the data chip ejected from the terminal.

âDone,â Cortana said over the interteam COM. âIâm in. Thereâs an exit to this bay thirty meters to your left. I will black out the security sensors there and open the door in twenty seconds. Hurry.â

John retrieved the chip and reinserted it into his skull. There was a flash of cold mercury in his mind.

âMove out,â John told Blue Team. âStay low.â

Fredâs and Lindaâs acknowledgment lights flickered, indicating the way was clear.

Blue Team ran, crouching, for thirty meters. A small access panel slid open, they piled throughâthen the door snapped shut behind them.

They proceeded, hunched over; they crawled on their hands and knees, on their stomachs, and through ducting so tight they had to shut down their shields and scrape by on bare armor over metal. For kilometers they followed Cortanaâs directions, halting as she ran motion sensors through diagnostics until they passedâ¦twisting and turning and shimmying down long lengths of pipe, dodging the giant blades of circulation fans, and edging by transformer coils so close that sparks arced across their shields.

According to Johnâs mission timer they had followed this route for eleven hoursâwhen it dead-ended.

âNew welds,â Fred said, running his gauntlet over the seams in the alloy plate blocking their path.

Cortana broke in over the COM, âIt must be a repair not logged into the station manifest.â

John said. âOptions?â

Cortana replied, âI have only limited mission-planning routines. There are three obvious options. You can blow the obstructing plate with a Lotus antitank mine. You can return to the repair bay where we might find a less obvious way in. Or

there is a faster, alternative route, but it has drawbacks.â

âTime is running out,â John said. âThe Covenant arenât going to stick around much longer before they strike Earth. Give me the faster route.â

âBacktrack four hundred meters, turn bearing zero-nine-zero, proceed another twenty meters, and exit through a waste access cover. From there you will move in the open for seven hundred meters, pass through a structure, and then down a guarded corridor to the reactor chambers.â

Grace interrupted, âWhat do you mean âin the openâ? This is a space station; there should be no open spaces.â

âSee for yourself,â Cortana said.

A schematic of the âopen spaceâ appeared on their heads-up displays. John wasnât able to make much sense of the diagram, but he could tell there were several catwalks, buildings, and even waterwaysâas Cortana indicated, lots of open areas for them to be seen in.

âLetâs take a look,â John said.

He led his team back the way they had come and pushed open the waste access duct. Blue light flooded the tunnel. John blinked and let his eyes adjust, then pushed the fiber-optic probe through the opening.

John didnât understand what he sawâthe optical probe must have malfunctioned. The image looked impossibly distorted. But there was no motion nearbyâ¦so he risked poking his head out.

He was in the end of an alley with walls towering ten meters to either side, casting dark shadows over the waste access hole. A group of Jackals passed the mouth of the alley only five meters from his position. He duckedâ¦and none of the vulture-like creatures saw him in the dark.

When they passed he looked up and saw that the fiber-optic probe had not been broken after all.

The space station was hollow inside, and a light beam shot lengthwise through its center: a blue light that provided full daylight illumination. Along the curved inner surface were needle-thin spires, squat stair-step pyramids, and columned temples. Catwalks with moving surfaces crisscrossed the space, as did tubes with capsules that whisked passengers. Water flowed along the walls in inward-spiral patterns and then waterfalled âupâ into great hollow towers that sprouted from the

opposite wall.

Banshees flew in formation through the center space of the great room, as did flocks of headless birds and great clouds of butterflies. It could have been an Escher etching come to life.

John felt extreme vertigo for a moment. Then he understood that with advanced Covenant gravity technology, there didnât have to be an up or down here.

Odd that a military station would have so much unnecessary ornamentation. Yet Fleet HQ had a large atrium in their lobby. Maybe this was the Covenant equivalentâmultiplied a hundredfold.

John spied a band of translucent material set into a far wall, glistening. âIs that the window to the repair bays, Cortana?â

âCorrect,â she replied.

âThen at least we know the way out. And the structure we need to enter?â

âOne oâclock,â she said. âThe one with the carved columns. It is the most direct route to the reactor chambers.â

John moved out of the hole and hugged the nearby wall. The shadows in the bright daylight would do a decent job of camouflaging them.

âOkay, Blue Team. Get orientedâ¦as much as you can. Our target is the columned building at one oâclock. I make it to be a three-hundred-meter sprint across open ground. Weâll make a break for it. Unless anyone has a better plan?â

Linda emerged, looked around, and said, âPermission to post on the rooftop and provide cover.â

âDo it,â John said. âLet me know when youâre in position and ready.â

Linda retrieved a padded grappling hook and rope from her pack, twirled it, and tossed it up and over the adjacent roof. She tugged it once, it caught, and then she quickly ascended.

The remaining Spartans joined John in the shadows. He shouldered his battle rifle and thumbed the safety off.

Lindaâs acknowledgment light winked once.

John tensed and ran. It took him three strides to build to his top-speed sprint. His adrenaline spiked and it made his blood burn. He felt time slow, his perception running at an over-clocked pace. He focused on speedâputting one foot in front of the other. His boots dug into cobblestones, crushed rock, and

sent a fine spray of gravel behind him. He saw three obstacles in his path: a group of startled Grunts. He slammed the butt of his rifle into the nearest one, and crushed its skull. The dead Grunt spun end over end and landed in a heap. He heard squawks and shouts around him but didnât stop to look.

He was on the stairs of the building, worn-smooth stone steps that he bounded up five at a time. John saw three friendly contacts behind him on his motion trackerâ¦and at the periphery of its range a solid mass of enemy contacts.

âYouâre good so far,â Linda reported. âThere are Elites, but theyâre unarmed. No, wait. A Hunter pair is advancing on your position. Stand by.â

A quartet of shots split the air like thunderclaps.

âThreat neutralized,â Linda said. âThe rest of them are scattering. Banshees approaching. Iâm moving.â

John cleared the stairs and skidded to a halt on the threshold of the temple. The interior was cold; external temperature readings were near freezing. Light filtered in through stained-glass windows in the ceiling, tinged lavender, cobalt, and turquoise. Three rows of giant columns made of blue-black basalt ran the length of the thirty-meter-long rectangular structure, casting long shadows. It was a good place for an ambush. He set his back against one of the pillars and swept the entrance, covering his team as they entered.

âCortana, update on station security?â John said.

âThere are dozens of reports on the security channels. Iâve got them covered.â

Another Cortana voice broke in over the first: âAlso be advised, Chief, that there are Brutes in this temple. They shouldnât be a significant threat.â

John wasnât so sure of that. He also wondered why there now seemed to be more than one Cortana in the stationâs systemâbut that could wait. They had to keep moving now that they had revealed their position. He waved Blue Team forward.

John took point. He moved up to the next column in the middle of the building. Fred and Will stepped over to the columns on either side behind John. Grace had their backs.

There was a flicker on his motion sensorâjust ahead. It vanished.

John held up his hand. Blue Team froze.

His motion detector was clearâ¦but there had been *something* there.

He pulled out a frag grenade.

The transient contact was backâa shadow moved around the same pillar John used for cover. It moved faster than an Eliteâas fast as John.

He fired his rifle point blank into the shadowy silhouette. It didnât slowâit only howled with rage.

Will and Fred fired three-round bursts from their rifles into the creature. It flinched with each bullet impact.

Three explosions detonated behind them. Graceâs biosign alarm shrilled and flashed on Johnâs heads-up display.

âAmbush!â Will cried out.

The Brute stepped from the shadows and faced John. It was taller than an Eliteâwider and more muscular. Its mouth was lined with razor-sharp teeth, and its red eyes burned with hate. Its blue-gray skin was riddled with bullet holes.

The Brute tackled John, knocking his weapon from his grasp. Even with his MJOLNIR armor, John was not as strong as the alien.

It pounded on him with bare fists, broke through his shielding, grabbed his neck, and squeezed.

Red flashes played across Johnâs vision. He began to black out.

Chapter Thirty-Four

1751 Hours, September 13, 2552 (Revised Date, Military Calendar) \ Aboard Covenant Battle Station *Unyielding Hierophant*.

John struggled and tried to pry the hands from his throat. The tendons in the Bruteâs forearms were solid bands of steelâand the creature was so determined to rip Johnâs head off that a full clip from a rifle into its chest hadnât even slowed it down.

Behind him, John felt another explosion thunder though the stone floor, followed by the staccato rattle of rifle fire.

Blue Team was busy with another threat. He was on his own.

John blinked. The darkness dimming the edge of his vision wouldnât clear.

John watched his shield bar flicker and sluggishly recharge. If it built up enough repulsive force, he might have a chance to wriggle out of the Bruteâs grasp. If he tried too quickly, though, the Brute wouldnât lose its grip and could pound his shield flat again.

The Brute bellowed, and globules of spittle spattered onto the Chiefâs visor. It leaned closer, screwing its massive hands tighter around his throat.

Johnâs vision narrowed. His windpipe swelled, and he gagged.

Shields were at one quarter charge. Itâd have to be enough.

John had been in similar death-grip holds beforeâendless hours of training on the wrestling mats with his teammates and martial arts specialists provided by Chief Mendez. There were ways to escape a larger, stronger opponent. And there were always countermoves to those escapes. And countermoves to those counters. It was like a game of chess, except the pieces were arms and legs, torque and your center of massâ¦and most importantly your mind.

He pulled his knees to his chest, and tucked his torso toward his pelvis at the same time. He twisted ninety degrees and shot out both legs and arms, and uncoiled his body. The maneuver was called âshrimping.â

Johnâs head slipped from the Bruteâs grasp.

He used the monsterâs split second of disorientation to scramble onto its back. John brought his elbow down on the base of the Bruteâs neck. He swept out its elbow, wrenched the joint around, and pushed it as far as it would goâfar past the point where any humanâs or Eliteâs would have snapped. John scissored his legs wide and pushed against the floor, leveraging his body to keep the Brute pinned.

It growled and pushed itself and John up with its one free arm.

âNo. You. Donât.â

John still clutched a frag grenade in his left hand. He flicked the arming pinâreached around and under, and thrust it into the Bruteâs beltâthen withdrew, sweeping out its one arm holding them up.

The Brute dropped onto the floor and screamed with rage.

The grenade detonated. It lifted them both a meter, and they landed againâ¦this time accompanied by a wet, pulpy smack as the Bruteâs dead hulk slammed into the ground.

The Master Chief rolled off and sprang to his feet and looked for Blue Team.

The large pillars blocked his view, but he saw on his motion tracker that Fred was behind a pillar down and to Johnâs left, and Will behind the pillar to the right. There was no tag indicating Graceâs location. There were, however, blurry motion contacts beyond the wide arched entrance to the temple.

And there was one other thingâneither Will nor Fred checked Johnâs status over the COM. That silence meant trouble.

John fumbled for his fiber-optic probe, but it had been lost in the scuffle with the Brute. He eased around the basalt pillar.

Grace lay face-first on the floor, five meters from the temple entrance. A puddle of hydrostatic gel and blood spread across the floor.

John clicked the COM once, a status query.

The instant he did this, two Brutes wheeled from their cover on either side of the entrance archway. They held weapons with large-caliber muzzles and padded stocks, fixed with razor-edged blades. One of the Brutes saw John, aimed, and fired.

John darted back behind the basalt pillar; he saw the flash and thunder of a grenade launched from the weaponâheard two

more rounds fired immediately after that.

The first grenade impacted on the opposite side of the pillar and exploded. The overpressure rattled his teeth.

The Chief turned and dived, hoping to get behind the next stone column beforeâ

âthe second and third grenades impacted and detonated on the pillar he had stood behind a split second before. The solid stone crumbled into fist-sized chunks.

He skidded and scrambled for cover as the upper part of that column collapsed, raining stones that shattered the floorâ¦and would have crushed him.

So much for engaging these Brutes in a direct assault. John wasnât up for another round of wrestling, either. Not with the clock ticking. Not with every Covenant on this station about to tear them to pieces. Complicating all this was the enemyâs apparent ability to locate them when they used the COM.

That only left one tactical option: run.

He wasnât going to leave Grace behind, though. Not until he knew for certain she was dead.

He removed his backpack and took out one of his two Lotus antitank mines. The disk was a quarter meter across with spikes set along the rim to stabilize it when buried. He set the detonation selector to countdown mode, seven seconds. He then slid around the edge of the column.

He threw the mine with a flick of his wrist. It spun in a wide arc across the temple hall and embedded into the wall just over the entrance archway.

Two seconds until it blew.

John clicked on his COM and said: âFire in the hole!â

The Brutes again wheeled around from their cover and leveled their deadly grenade launchers.

The Lotus mine detonatedâit was a flash and an instant of fire. The temple opening and Brutes vanished, replaced by a cloud of dust and a cascade of stones that fell from the ceiling.

One gray arm remained exposed under the rubble, still flexing.

John moved up. The entrance was sealed. They were safe for a few seconds.

He knelt next to Grace. Her biosigns had flatlined. He tried to roll her uprightâbut there was no need. The detonations he had

heard while wrestling the first Brute had been three of their high-velocity grenadesâ¦which had blown Graceâs midsection apart.

Fred and Will emerged from their cover. John looked at them and shook his head.

John opened the tiny access panel on Graceâs armor power pack and entered the fail-safe code. They still had a mission to finish, which meant they couldnât carry her out; it would slow them down too much. They wouldnât be leaving her for the Covenant either, though. Her armorâs tiny fusion reactor would overload and burn everything within a ten-meter radiusâGraceâs funeral pyre.

âLetâs move,â John said. âCortana, which way?â

âProceed into the temple thirty meters. Turn right. There will be a sealed doorway, an access hatch for Engineers. I will open it and lock it behind you. Hurry. Iâm encountering increased resistance from the stationâs AIs. While I have their security COM channels blocked, word of intruders is speeding via private COMs.â

There was a curious echo to her voice. Maybe it was feedback from the Covenant triangulating on their signals. Or maybe there was some other effect at work. What had she warned him about? Unforeseen complications using a copy of a copy of Cortana?

âRoger that,â he said and waved Fred and Will forward. He took one last look at Grace, then marched quickly and silently ahead.

There were no more motion contacts in the temple. The Chief, however, saw Grunts and Jackals, Elites and Hunters in murals painted on the walls. In the shadows and stained-glass filtered light, those pictures seemed to move. They genuflected to something farther ahead. The Chief wished he had more time to take a full video record.

Blue Team moved thirty meters and turned to face a section of the wall. It parted. The passage could have fit two Engineers side by side, but John had to crouch and turn sideways to pass. Will and Fred followed; Cortana sealed the door behind them.

They continued until the narrow passage turned ninety degrees and dropped straight down. Will attached a rope and they rappelled down a hundred meters, landing on a platform.

John overlooked a cavern hewn from rough stone that arched

up ninety meters and vanished into the shadows in the distance. Five hundred twelve fusion reactors that looked like flatted spiral seashells filled the space, stacked in rows and columns eight deep. Each was the size of a Pelican dropship and thrummed with power, casting off waves of wavering heat.

The open areas between the reactors were a tangle of plasma conduits and alive with swarms of thousands of buoyant Engineers as they tended the machinery. Faint wispy borealis comprised of escaped plasma swirled, whipped into a luminous froth by the intense magnetic vortices within the chamber.

It was a tremendous feat of engineering. It was as if the stationâs builders had hewn this from a seed asteroid and built the rest of the installation around it.

Will pointed across the room to three Jackals who walked along a catwalk. Blue Team held position and didnât move.

âThere,â Cortana announced. âAcross the platform is a terminal on the reactor subsystem.â

John held up a hand to Will and Fred, waited for the Jackal guards to pass, and then sprinted across the platform. He removed Cortanaâs chip and inserted it into the terminal.

After three seconds, she reported: âIâm in. Very few Covenant counterintrusion measures in this system. I can accomplish the overload.

âIâve found an exit route for Blue Team and uploaded it into your NAV systems,â she continued. âIt should be stealthy enough for you to return to the repair bay undetected. Once there, give me the order and I can begin. It will take ten minutes for the overload to build. Thereâs no stopping once I start this, Chief, so be sure.â

âThis station and the Covenant fleet might jump to Earth in the next ten minutes,â John said. He looked to Fred and Will, and they nodded as if they could read his mind.

âProceed with the overload *now*, Cortana.â

The light from the reactors shifted; blue plasma tinged white and spread like a poison through the interconnecting conduits.

âOverload commencing,â the copy of Cortana announced. âI suggest Blue Team move at top speed to the exit.â

A NAV triangle indicated a ladder that ran to the catwalk overhead. John held up two fingers at Will and Fred and then nodded to the patrolling Jackals. Fred and Will knelt, braced,

and waited for him to go ahead.

John climbed the ladder. As he neared the top, three shots rang out behind him. The sound was nearly drowned out by the intensifying reverberations from the reactors. He cleared the top of the ladder and saw three dead Jackals on the catwalk. He swept both directions with his rifle and then waved Will and Fred forward.

His countdown timer read 9:47. The heat and light from the reactors grew stronger, and Johnâs shields flared slightly.

Blue Team jogged down the catwalk to an elevator. They got inside, the doors closed, and the car immediately ascended.

When the doors opened again, artificial blue sunlight filled the carâas did the shadows cast by two Elites waiting for the elevator. Blue Team opened fire and cut down the Elites, leaving a spray of blood across the ground.

The Chief edged around the frame of the elevator door and saw a tangle of pipes and fountains and one of the curious spiral waterways that fell up from its center. This was a heat exchange plant for the reactors below. Already the water in the canals steamed and boiled.

He saw that Covenant Elite and Hunter pairs had converged at the entrance to the temple a hundred meters to his right. Over the temple dozens of Banshee fliers circled the carnage.

A gang of Grunts managed to clear an opening to the temple. There was a flash of light and fire that roiled out in a long plume, burning them as well as their Elite overseers.

âGood-bye, Grace,â John whispered.

The detonation of her power pack would buy them more time while the Covenant forces tried to figure out what just happenedâperhaps theyâd think Blue Team was still inside the temple. Grace had also taken out a dozen Grunts and four Elites with her last action. That would have pleased her.

John turned toward the far end of the great room and spotted a band of translucent material on the far wall. It led to the repair bays and airlocks beyond. That was their exit.

He glanced at his mission timer: 8:42. Theyâd have to get there fast.

His gaze locked onto the Banshees in the air. He searched for Linda, posted somewhere in the odd geometry of this station. She could be anywhere along several kilometers of cityscape.

John clicked on his COM. âLinda, do not reply. The Covenant are triangulating on our signals. Iâm hoping they do and send a few of those Banshees to reconnoiter. When they get close to the heat-exchange plant, take them outâweâll need their vehicles.â

There was no answer. Did that mean Linda understood and was in a position to help? Or was she dead?

As John hoped, three Banshees peeled off the search formation, circling the temple and turning toward them.

John waved Fred and Will out of the elevator and into the forest of steaming pipes. They scattered, took cover, and aimed at the incoming Banshees.

The Banshees spread out, slowedâ¦but then banked, returning to the temple.

John clicked his COM three times.

The Elite pilots immediately wheeled about and accelerated toward their position. One Banshee flier nosed into a classic strafing dive. Its plasma cannons warmed and crackled with energy, indicating an imminent discharge.

There was a spray of blood in the flier, then the pilot fell forward and pushed the accelerator to full. The Banshee careened through the air at maximum velocityâcrashing into a water-recovery tower, and wobbled to the ground.

âLinda,â John muttered and tried to spot her. Judging from the blood spray, sheâd managed to send a round through the tiny exposed area of the cockpit, and inflicted a lethal ricochet. He looked for her position; most likely the shot had come from behind and above. There were numerous catwalks running across the length of the massive room. She had to be on one of them.

The two remaining Banshees accelerated toward Blue Team. Their plasma cannons flickered, and they leveled into a flat trajectory.

John, Fred, and Will raised their rifles.

There was a muted *crack* of a sniper rifle, and another Banshee drifted to the ground, its pilot felled by Lindaâs uncanny skill.

The last remaining pilot veered starboard, not knowing what had just taken out its two wingmatesâ¦only that it had to get out of the area if it was going to live. In the tightest arc of its curve, the craft slowed. John couldnât tell precisely where the shot came from, but a third sniper round ricocheted through the

craftâs cockpit. The Banshee spun in circles before it thumped to a halt, nose-down in the street.

Three impossible shots, three kills. Even for Linda, this was superb shootingâthe finest shots John had ever seen. He looked around the station, over the buildings, spires, catwalks, transit tubesâit was impossible to spot her.

John waved Fred and Will toward two of the downed Banshees and sprinted toward the one still spinning riderless in the street, its canards scraping and sparking along the stones.

He climbed aboard, pushed the throttle forward, and pointed to the far wall. He held his hand flat and lowered it, indicating that Fred and Will should skim low to the ground.

John veered off in a wide arc. Maybe he could divert the attention away from them.

He rose slightly higher and buzzed the tops of gilt domes and statues of Elite heroes with raised swords. Grunts and Jackals scattered as he approached, and John fired at them. He shifted to the side as he splashed though water falling from one side of the station to the other.

Four Banshee fliers fell in behind him. John weaved back and forth. A pair of plasma bolts sizzled over his head.

He risked a look over his shoulder and saw two of the Banshees drop away. A moment later they crashed into the surface.

Linda still had his back covered.

He dropped to the ground and skimmed along a street, skidded, and turned into an alley. Banshee shadows passed overhead. He pushed the throttle to full and made a direct run toward the back wall.

Will and Fred had grounded their fliers and crouched next to the meter-thick window separating this inner section from the repair bays. John settled his Banshee next to theirs, turned his backpack around, reached in, and tossed Fred his last Lotus antitank mine.

âGet that on the window and set for a remote trigger.â He then risked an open COM channel to the copy of Cortana in the stationâs system. âCortana, can you open the airlocks in the repair bay?â

A flurry of voices filled the COM, all speaking at the same time, shouting to be heard over one anotherâ¦all Cortanaâs

voices. One finally broke through. âChief, Iâve spun off a copy dedicated exclusively to communicating with you. Go ahead.â

âHow many copies are there of you?â

âUnknown. Hundreds. The Covenant AI overwhelmed me. Had to. This is difficult. Many errors in my systems. Filtering over all subchannels of information.

âTo answer your initial question: yes. I can override safety lockouts and open the airlocks. My systems are fragmenting. I cannot exist in a coherent state much longer.â

John looked out across the kilometers of curving cityscape. Wraith tanks rolled into the streets; legions of Grunts, Jackals, and Elites raced from building to building and shot at targets that werenât there. Banshees and Ghosts buzzed through the air like clouds of flies.

Johnâs mission countdown timer read 7:45.

âLindaâs back there,â he told Fred and Will. Fred started to say something, but John cut him off. âIf Iâm not back in three minutes, blow that window and exit.â

Fred hesitated but then nodded.

âI canât leave her,â John said and gunned his Bansheeâs throttle. âNot if sheâs still alive.â

Dr. Halseyâs last words to him resonated in Johnâs mind: *I should have been trying to save every single human lifeâno matter what it cost.*

Heâd get to Linda. Heâd get her out aliveâor die trying.

Chapter Thirty-Five

1820 Hours, September 13, 2552 (Revised Date, Military Calendar) \ Aboard Covenant Battle Station *Unyielding Hierophant*.

The Master Chief accelerated his Banshee to its top speed.

There was another explosion at the temple, and plumes of steam geysered into the air from the heat-exchange plant. The circling formations of Banshees scattered.

John tucked as close as he could to his flierâs fuselage and coaxed every bit of speed from the craft.

A pair of Banshees swooped in, one off his port, the other on his starboard. Their plasma weapons heated; John rolled back and forth to throw their aim. He braced for impactâ¦but there was none.

The Chief craned his head back and saw the pilot of the lead Banshee slump, slide off the flier, and plummet to the ground. The trailing Banshee was riderless as wellâ¦only a blood-spattered cockpit and cowling.

Linda still had him coveredâhad taken out both pilots with precise fire. She had to be close.

John scanned the area. There were spires and water-reclamation towers, transport tubes and catwalks that crisscrossed the center of the interior. There was a nexus of walkways near the beam of illumination that ran down the center of the station, a location with enough glare that a sniper might hide in the open undetected.

He risked keying Lindaâs private COM channel. âThought you might need a ride, so Iââ

An energy mortar blasted over Johnâs shoulder, burning the air like a sun in close orbit and draining his shields to half. It impacted a water tower, and the structure detonated into a cloud of blinding steam.

John punched the Banshee through the cloud, glanced down, and saw a Wraith tank tracking his trajectory. He ducked and weaved but kept moving toward Lindaâs probable location.

His mission countdown timer read 7:06. There was no time

for fancy evasive maneuvers.

Did Linda even want to be found? Maybe she wanted him to get to safety and leave her behind? Itâs what he would have done.

âPosition report, Linda,â John barked over the COM. âThatâs a direct order.â

Three seconds ticked off his mission clock and then the six-tone *âOly Oly Oxen Freeâ* song whistled through Johnâs speakers and a NAV marker appeared on his heads-up display.

The triangular marker centered on a rope that ran between two transit tubes and dangled perilously close to the high-intensity light beam. It was a barely discernible thread that ran through a hard shadow cast by a nearby catwalk.

John hit his image enhancers. Through the glare of the light, and in the depths of the shadow, he caught the flicker of reflected optics.

Linda used *both* the brilliant light and the darkness to hide.

John angled the Banshee to her. He clipped the tether line from his armor to the frame of the Banshee and pulled his body deeper into the craft.

When he was thirty meters away, he made visual contact. Linda had the rope coiled about a boot and wrapped about one forearm. She held her sniper rifle in one arm, and John could only surmise that she had been firing from such an impossible position.

She uncoiled the rope from her boot, swung, released at the apex of the arcâand fell toward him.

John forced the Bansheeâs cowling up against straining hydraulics and stretched out his arm, his fingers touched hersâand her hand slapped firmly into his gauntlet.

He swung her around and over his shoulder. Linda landed atop him, holding on to his armor.

John spun the Banshee about and accelerated back to the windows. The craftâs forward cowling remained wrenched up and slowed them downâbut there was no other way to fit two people on the craft.

âComing in hot,â John said over the COM to Fred and Will. âOpen the door and get ready for a quick exit, Blue Team.â

Fredâs acknowledgment light winked on.

âCortana, breach those airlocks. Now!â

A cacophony of voices filled Johnâs COM. There were so many copies of Cortana speaking at the same time he couldnât make out anything coherent.

âCortana, the airlocks.â

There was a *pop* of static. âApologies, Chief,â Cortana replied. âIâve spun off a dedicated copy toâ¦toâ¦speak with you.â

John thought she had already made a copy to talk directly with him. What had happened to it?

âOverride the airlock safeties, Cortana. Open the external and repair bay doors.â

âWorking, Chief. Thereâs too much system COM traffic. So many of us. Near saturation level. Have to fight to getâ¦Stand byâ¦â

An explosion appeared a kilometer away along the far wall. The Lotus antitank mine became a blossom of flame and black smoke that drifted and diffused and left a spiderweb of cracks on the meter-thick translucent section.

But the window held.

That Lotus antitank mine could have sheared through that wall even if it had been reinforced steel, but this wall had remained in one piece.

They were stuck inside.

Three hundred meters to the window.

âCortana!â

In Johnâs peripheral vision he saw clouds of Banshee fliers and a slew of Ghosts gaining on them.

âCortanaâ*itâs now or never!*â

âInâ¦â Cortanaâs voice was faint. âIntersystem failure 08934-EE. Global system error 9845-W. Resetting. Inner doors open. Override in progress. System lockdoââ

The COM went dead.

A hundred meters away, beyond the cracked window, the atmosphere turned white for a split second then cleared. Spaced every twenty meters along the bay walls, the airlock doors were opening. Beyond, stars shone upon velvet black.

Fred and Willâs Banshees appeared off Johnâs starboard canard. John pointed and together they dived, accelerating toward a bullâs-eye pattern of cracks on the translucent portion of the wall.

That web of fissures spread: fingers that stretched and split

along the length of the windowâ¦slowed and stopped.

John fired the Bansheeâs plasma cannons. Fred opened fire as well, and four blobs of plasma splashed across the glassy surface fifty meters away.

The window flexed, crackled, tiny flakes popped offâ¦but the translucent material remained stubbornly intact.

John was thirty meters from the surfaceâheâd have to veer off now, or impact upon it. He gritted his teeth and braced himself.

Ten meters.

The windowâs smooth surface flashed into a jigsaw mosaic. The squealing of glass over glass filled the air. It shattered.

The entire length crumbled and instantly blasted into the vacuum of spaceâswept out by the pressurized atmosphere filling the interior of the station.

John tried to maneuver the Banshee. He bounced into the repair bay, rolled the craft over and uprightâfell off, tumbled though the airlockâ¦and drifted away into the darkness of space.

He flailed his limbs in the zero gravity, and the tether on his belt snapped taut. He recoiled back toward the Banshee. Linda held on with one hand and held out the other to him. He climbed back aboard and tapped the thrusters to stabilize their pitch and yaw.

Behind them the station vented gas as well as the bodies of Covenant Engineers, Grunts, Jackals, and Elites. Clouds of metal junk bled from the ruptures. Tendrils of steam flash froze into glittering ice crystals.

The Covenant fleet moved as wellâsome cruisers closed with the station, others moved farther away. There were five hundred alien warships without leadership from their command-and-control center, and they reminded John of motes of dust in a sunbeamâsilently floating in every direction.

John spotted a dropship drifting a kilometer ahead, dead in space.

He clicked his COM once and dropped a NAV marker onto a Covenant craft. Fred and Willâs acknowledgment lights winked on.

John pulsed the Bansheeâs engines once and let its inertia carry them to the dropship. He hoped the rest of the Covenant Fleet was trying to figure out what had just happenedâ¦and not paying any attention to one more piece of debris floating in

space.

The Banshees gently impacted onto the tumbling dropship. John grasped the hull, and Linda scrabbled over him, opened the port access hatch, and entered. Fred and Will drifted closer, and John helped them aboard.

He hesitated and took another look at the Covenant fleet. Hundred of ships without control. But how long would that last? Even if the stationâs reactors chained and blewâ¦the Covenant still had enough force to destroy Earthâs defenses and burn it to a cinder.

All they had done was buy a little time: as long as it took for someone to take charge of the Covenant fleet. That wasnât enough, but John wasnât sure what else to do.

He crawled to the hatch, entered the ship, and sealed it behind him.

Linda stood at the pilotâs console while Fred stood beside her manning the ops station. An engine schematic appeared in front of Linda, and power pulsed through its plasma coils. The interior lights dimly glowed.

âWhere to, Chief?â Linda asked.

âAway,â John said and looked at the system NAV display. He pointed to the tiny moon orbiting the nearby planet. âGet us into the moonâs shadow. But slow. Try not to attract any attention.â

His countdown timer read 5:12. They might still have time.

âRoger,â Linda said.

The dropship spun about and gently moved away from the station, almost imperceptibly accelerating toward the tiny moon covered with black and silver pockmarks.

Fred hunched over his console. Thick spiky lines representing the Covenant F-through K-bands fluxed and flickered on his screen. âCovenant COM channels are jammed,â he reported. âCommuniquÃ©s and queries to and from every ship in the fleet wondering what the hell is going on. And the stationâs COM channels are all full of those copied Cortanasâ¦and sheâs just repeating different system error codes.â

âWhatâs this?â John asked, leaning over Fredâs shoulder. He pointed to one COM band with only a single spike.

Fred looked at the Covenant calligraphy for a long moment, and then inhaled sharply. âIf the translation software is working right,â he whispered, âthatâs the E-bandâ¦itâs one of ours.â

Fred snapped on the external speakers. Six tones beeped, stopped, and then repeated.

âOly Oly Oxen Free,â John breathed. âSend the countersign, Fred.â

âAye, Chief. Sending now.â

Who could have sent that signal? There was no other living Spartan in this system. Unless it was Dr. Halsey and Kelly. Had they somehow tracked them?

âItâs about time you showed up.â The drawling voice of Admiral Whitcomb was loud and clear over the COM. *âSwitch to encryption scheme âRainbow.ââ*

John nodded to Fred, who ran a shunt from the Covenant COM into the data port in the back of his helmet. âDecryption online,â Fred reported.

âAdmiral,â John said. âWith all due respect, sir, why are you here?â

âLieutenant Haverson suggested we drop out of Slipspace on the edge of this systemâhide in the Oort cloud and gather a little intel.â The Admiral sighed. *âWell, I took one look and figured that even if you took out that stationâ¦hell, son, thereâd still be a couple of hundred Covenant ships within spittinâ distance of Earth. Me getting there and warning them about it wouldnât make a lick of difference. So Iâm going to do something about it here and now. Youâve done your part, Chief. Leave the rest to me.â*

There was a pause, then the Admiral asked in a low, serious tone, *âYou did get it done, didnât you, son? You got that station rigged to blow?â*

âYes, sir.â John linked his mission timer to the COM. âFour minutes thirty-two seconds and counting.â

âPerfect, Master Chief. Bring âem on back to the barn. Stay on your heading. Your instincts are dead on. Weâre on the far side of the moon and are waiting for you.â

John motioned to Linda to increase their velocity. She pushed the acceleration stripe to three quarters power.

âWaiting, sir?â

âWhitcomb over and out.â The COM went dead.

John looked to Will, Fred, and Linda, and they all shrugged.

He pushed the acceleration stripe to full velocity, and the dropship entered a high orbit around the splotchy moon, arcing around to the far side, where the battered *Gettysburg* waited for

them.

But only the *Gettysburg*.

âWhereâs *Ascendant Justice*?â John whispered.

Chapter Thirty-Six

1825 Hours, September 13, 2552 (Revised Date, Military Calendar) \ Aboard UNSC Vessel *Gettysburg*, Near Covenant Battle Station *Unyielding Hierophant*.

The Master Chief and Blue Team stepped off the lift and onto the bridge of the *Gettysburg*.

âSirââ John started to salute Admiral Whitcomb, but neither the Admiral nor Lieutenant Haverson was there.

The only two on the bridge were Sergeant Johnson, who stared at the forward viewscreens, and Cortana, whose holographic figure burned bright blue and streamed with code symbols and mathematics beyond Johnâs comprehension.

Sergeant Johnson turned toward them. He looked the Spartans over and frowned, noting that not all of them had returned.

âIâm not sure what that thing is.â The Sergeant nodded to viewscreen one, centered on the Covenant command-and-control station. âDonât look like any âuneven elephantâ to meâmore like two squid kissing. Whatever it is, damned glad itâs going to blow up. Nice jobâalmost as good as if we sent in the Marines.â One corner of his mouth quirked into a smile.

âWhereâs the Admiral?â the Master Chief asked. âAnd Lieutenant Haverson?â

The Sergeantâs half smile vanished, and his eyes darkened. He moved to Weapons Station One. âIâll show you. A Clarion spy drone is nearly in position.â

The center viewscreen fuzzed with static and then resolved to show the *Ascendant Justice* moving out of the shadow of the moon. The once formidable Covenant flagship was a wreck; its hull was breached in a dozen places, its skeletal frame exposed, and only a handful of plasma conduits flickered with life.

âI donât understand,â the Chief said. He stepped closer to Cortanaâs hologram. Being near the real Cortanaânot one of her fragmented copiesâreassured him that everything was under control. âWhatâs going on?â

âStand by, Chief,â she replied. âIâm attempting to attune *Ascendant Justice*âs Slipspace drive to the *Gettysburg*âs mass and profile.â

âThatâs what we were up to while you were off sight-seeing,â the Sergeant told him. âWe pulled the Slipspace matrix out of our piggybacked ship and slapped it into the *Gettysburg*.â

John wheeled and faced the viewscreens. *Ascendant Justice* couldnât jump? Then why was it headed straight toward the Covenant fleet? A decoy? He glanced at the countdown timer: 2:09 left.

âNot a decoy,â he whispered, ââ¦a lure. Sergeant, get a signal to *Ascendant Justice*. Bounce it off that spy drone if you have to.â

âRoger, Chief,â Sergeant Johnson said and tapped in commands. An error warning blared. He shook his head, puzzled, and tried again, carefully retyping.

âLinda, take the NAV station. Fred, youâre on Ops. Will, give the Sergeant a hand at Weapons One.â

Blue Team jumped to their assigned stations.

Will edged the Sergeant aside and quickly tapped three buttons. âCOM patch established,â he reported. âOn viewscreen two.â

The bridge of *Ascendant Justice* appeared on screen. Lieutenant Haverson and Admiral Whitcomb stood on the central raised dais, adjusting the holographic controls. Behind them, the wall displays showed Covenant ships closing on their position.

Admiral Whitcomb smiled. âGlad to see you made it safely aboard, son.â

âSir, that fleet will destroy you before you can fire a single salvo.â

âI donât think so, Master Chief,â he replied and tapped the holographic display. A slim blue crystalline shard appearedâan exact copy of the alien artifact they found on Reach. âIâm sending this image to every ship in the system and letting them know itâs theirs for the takingâ¦if they dare to board this ship and face Earthâs best warriors.â He laughed. âI think thatâll appeal to those Elites and their overinflated sense of honor.â

John nodded. âYes, sir. It will.â

He looked at the countdown timer: 1:42.

The Covenant fleet turned and moved toward the incoming *Ascendant Justice*. A cloud of cruisers and carriers. Hundreds of

them. Impossible odds.

âFire turret four, Lieutenant,â the Admiral ordered.

âFiring!â Haverson replied, his face set in grim determination.

A lance of plasma discharged, arced, and impacted upon the nose of the nearest carrier. The energy splashed over their shields and dissipated.

âTurret five, Lieutenant. Take them down.â

âFiring five, sir,â Haverson said.

A second plasma bolt followed the first. It blasted the carrierâs weakened shields and melted armor and hull, exploding through the foredecks. The ship rolled and crashed into a cruiser that had come too close.

âNice shooting, Lieutenant,â the Admiral murmured.

The Covenant fleet responded with a blinding volley of laser fire. Pinpoints of energy concentrated on *Ascendant Justice*âs aft decks, boiled armor off in thick layersâsheared through to the other side, severing its engines.

The Admiral smiled. âA sound tactical response. Good thing they donât know weâre just using that slingshot around the moon and our inertia to do the rest of the job.â He glanced at the displays and the station growing larger on them. âHang on, Lieutenant. Brace for impact.â

Ascendant Justice drifted closer to the station.

It crashed into the central ring, crushing the structure, and continued forward, dimpling the hull of the pinched center sectionâ¦and finally ground to a halt with its nose impaled within the *Unyielding Hierophant*.

The center viewscreen on the bridge of the *Gettysburg* shattered into static and then slowly resolved. The wavering image of Admiral Whitcomb pulled himself upright. A gash from his temple to the corner of his mouth wept blood. Lieutenant Haverson groggily got to his feet as well, his arm held at an odd angle, broken.

âSystemwide transmission,â Admiral Whitcomb barked to Haverson.

âAye, sir,â Haverson said and clumsily adjusted the COM.

âCome on, mighty Covenant warriors,â the Admiral shouted. âWeâre here in the middle of your fleet with your âholy of holies.ââ He flicked his finger at the holographic shard, and it

pinged as if actually struck. âCome and get it!â He laughed again.

Hundreds of Covenant ships moved toward them. Grapple lines and grav beams attached to the broken hull of the *Ascendant Justice*. A thousand dropships and Elites in thrust packs filled the space around the flagship.

The Master Chief watched the countdown timer: 0:27.

Along the ten-kilometer dorsal bulb of the space station, patches warmed to a dull red, the heat from the overloading reactors becoming outwardly visible.

âMove us back, Linda,â John said. âKeep us in the moonâs shadow. Use as much power as we can spare.â

âAye, Chief,â Linda replied. âForward thrusters answering one third reverse power. Course one-eight-zero.â

âCortana,â he asked, âSlipspace generator status?â

âAlmost ready, Chief,â Cortana said. She bit her lower lip in concentration. âCapacitor charge at eighty percent. Adjusting final calculations. Stand by.â

On screen the Admiral wheeled toward the bulkhead sealing the flagshipâs bridge. Sparks cascaded along the seam as arc cutters on the other side penetrated. âMaster Chief, I have final orders for you.â

âSir,â John said.

âYou watch and see whatâs left of this rabble when weâre done with âem. Do *not* engage under any circumstances. You get the intel and hightail it back to Earth and make your report.â

âUnderstood, sir.â

âNow listen, son, remember when we talked about the Alamo? You know every one of the brave defenders in those fights died. They knew the odds, but they hurt the enemy.â He gritted his teeth in pain. âBoth were tactical defeats, but in the end they were also brilliant strategic victories. They made the enemy afraid. Just a few good soldiers fighting for whatâs right made the difference.â

âYes, sir.â

John remembered all those who had made a difference for him. Sam. James. CPO Mendez. Captain Keyes. The men and women who had fought and died on Halo. And now two more names to add to that list: Whitcomb and Haverson.

The bulkhead blasted off its mounts and clattered onto the

deck of the *Ascendant Justice*âs bridge. Silhouetted in the passage were dozens of Elites, their energy swords blurs of motion and light. Admiral Whitcomb fired a submachine gun.

The central viewscreen dissolved into static.

John watched for a moment, hoping the Admiral and the Lieutenant would reappearâ¦but screen number two remained offline.

Video feed from the Clarion spy drone filled the side screens. There were two hundred warships clustered tightly about the figure-eight-shaped *Unyielding Hierophant*. A similar number of ships circled in loose orbital trajectories. The formation reminded John of a miniature spiral galaxyâ¦with a supernova core.

The dorsal bulb of the space station shot with colorâred, orange, and blurred with blue-white heat in a heartbeat; plasma tendrils erupted from the surface like solar flares. Internal explosions chained down the stationâs length through the narrow center portion and into the ventral bulb, shattering that section and discharging bolts of lightning that arced along the stationâs fragments and to the nearby ships.

The *Unyielding Hierophant* became a roiling cloud of fiery plasma and smoke and static charges that enveloped the ships that had come to engage *Ascendant Justice*, ships that flashed white hot and, in an instant, vaporized.

This thunderhead of superheated and pressurized gas ballooned outward to engulf the rest of the orbiting flotilla; heated their shields, which shimmered silver and popped like soap bubbles; melted their hulls and consumed them.

The blast cooled and the cloud dissipatedâbut ejected debris continued outward, leaving comet trails, and impacted on stray ships not near the epicenter.

âMove the drone back into the moonâs shadow,â John ordered.

âAye, Chief,â Will said. âThrusters responding.â

The side viewscreens showed a hailstorm of molten metal streaking toward the droneâs camerasâthen their view was obscured by the black- and silver-pockmarked surface of the tiny moon.

âCortana, is the *Gettysburg* ready to jump?â the Chief asked.

âSlipspace capacitors charged, Master Chief. Ready when you

are.â

âStand by.â John waited a minute. No one spoke. âWill, bring the drone back out.â

âRoger, Chief.â

The side viewscreen changed from moonscape to space. There was little left of the fleet or the command-and-control stationâonly clouds of smoke, glittering metal, and ashes.

A few Covenant warships survived. Those that could slowly moved away from the blast siteâ¦others drifted dead in space. Perhaps a dozen of their original five hundred craft had come through the explosion.

âA brilliant strategic victory,â John whispered, the Admiralâs last words echoing in his mind.

âCortana, get us out of here.â

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The Master Chief stood on the bridge of the *Gettysburg* and watched the stars blur and vanish into the absolute blackness of Slipspace.

They had jumped away from the battle zone over the *Unyielding Hierophant*, emerged in normal space, and plotted their position. Cortana adjusted their course, and now they were finally on their way to Earth. Although they had overwhelming evidence that the Covenant knew the location of Earth, âoverwhelmingâ was not absolute proof. The Cole Protocol still applied.

âSlipspace transition complete,â Cortana said. âETA to Earth in thirty-five hours, Chief.â The tiny hologram of Cortana continued to stare at him, and her slender brows knit together.

âWas there something else, Cortana?â he asked.

The furrow in her brow deepened. She sighed and crossed her arms over her chest. âI was wondering about the copy of my infiltration programming.â Cortanaâs color cooled from blue to ultramarine. âIâve reviewed your mission logs. Maybe it was the additional copying that caused its breakdown, but that copy did have some of my core personality programming as well. I just hope itâs not a sign ofâ¦some other instability.â

Cortana had been on edge. She had been so distracted at times she hadnât even known the correct time. They had, however, all been pushed to the breaking point in the last few

weeks. And despite any minor flaws, Cortana had always come through for him.

âWe couldnât have survived without you,â he finally told her. âYour programming is as good as ours.â

She tinged pink and then her hologram returned to a cool blue hue. âAre my aural systems malfunctioning or was that a compliment, Chief?â

âContinue to monitor Slipspace for any anomalies,â the Master Chief said, ignoring her.

He strode to the three forward viewscreens and stared into blackness. He wanted solitude, to gaze at nothing, and complete the task that he dreaded.

John pulled his team roster onto his heads-up display. He ran down the list, designating all those who had died on Reach, and afterward, as Missing In Action. James, Li, Graceâ¦and all his dead teammates who would never officially be âallowedâ to die. And in his mind, they would never find any peace until this war was won.

He paused at Kellyâs name.

John listed her as MIA, too. She was ironically the only Spartan truly missing, whisked away by Dr. Halsey on some secret private mission. John knew that whatever the doctor had planned, she would protect Kelly if she could. Still, he couldnât help but worry about them both.

He added Corporal Locklear to his list and designated him Killed In Action. It was a more fitting end for a man who had been as much a warrior as any Spartan.

The last three names on his list he stared at for a long time: Warrant Officer Shiela Polaski, Lieutenant Elias Haverson, and Admiral Danforth Whitcomb. He reluctantly listed them as KIA and referenced his mission report, which detailed their heroism.

Two men had stopped a Covenant armada. They had willingly died doing it, and they had bought the human race a brief respite from destruction.

John felt glad. They were soldiers, sworn to protect humanity from all threats, and they had fulfilled their duty as few ever could. And like his Spartans who were âmissing in action,â the Admiral and the Lieutenant would never die, either. Not because of a technicality in a mission status listing, but because in their deaths they would live on as inspirations.

John turned and watched as Linda, Will, and Fred occupied the bridge stations. John would make sure that he and the last surviving Spartans did the same.

The elevator doors opened, and Sergeant Johnson stepped onto the bridge.

âGot all those Covenant Engineers rounded up on B-Deck,â Sergeant Johnson announced. âSlippery suckers.â

The Chief nodded.

âThe boys at ONI and those squid heads have a lot in common. Canât understand a thing they say and theyâre just as good looking. Guess theyâre all going to have a long talk about technical whatsits and scientific doodads when we get home.â

Sergeant Johnson crossed the bridge to the Master Chief. âThereâs one other thing. Another ONI thing.â He held out a data crystal and his gaze fell to the deck. âLieutenant Haverson gave this to me before he and the Admiral left. He said youâd have to deliver it for him.â

John stared at the data crystal and reluctantly plucked it from the Sergeantâs fingers as if it were a slug of unstable radioactive material.

âThank you, Sergeant.â He hesitated and then added, âIâll take care of this.â

The Sergeant nodded and strode toward Weapons Station One.

John turned back to the blank monitors and retrieved the other data crystal from his belt compartment. Yesterday he had believed he had done the right thing by giving the Lieutenant all of Dr. Halseyâs Flood dataâincluding the data on the Sergeant, which she assured him would lead to his death.

But now?

Now, John knew the difference one man could make in this war. He understood Dr. Halseyâs desire to save every person she could.

John held the two data crystals, one in each hand, and stared at themâtrying to discern the future from their glimmering facets.

That was the point, wasnât it? He couldnât know the future. He had to do what he could to save every person. Today. Now.

So he decided.

He tightened his fist around the crystal with the complete

mission data and crushed it to dust. John couldnât condemn Sergeant Johnson.

He hefted the remaining data crystal. There would have to be enough in it for ONI. He set the crystal securely back into his belt.

Today they had won. They had stopped the Covenant. John would return to Earth with a warning and enough intel to keep scientists at ONI busy.

But what about tomorrow? The Covenant didnât give up once they set their sights on a target. They wanted Earthâtheyâd come for it. Destroying their fleet would only delay that inevitable fact.

They had time, though. Maybe enough time to prepare for whatever the Covenant could throw at them.

John would take todayâs victory. And heâd be there when the fighting started againâheâd be there to win.

Section VII
Harbinger

Epilogue

Ninth Age of Reclamation, Step of Silence \ Covenant Holy City âHigh Charity,â Sanctum of the Hierarchs.

A hundred thousand probes darted and scanned with winking electronic eyes across the void of tangled nonspaces enveloping the Covenant inner empire. They gathered data and emerged into the cold vacuum, where they were recovered by the hundreds of supercarriers and cruisers in station-keeping positions around the massive, bulbous planetoid that dominated the heavens.

Not a single rock larger than a centimeter could enter this space without being identified, targeted, and vaporized. Authorization codes were updated hourly, and if any incoming vessel hesitated for a millisecond with the proper response, it, too, met unyielding destruction.

The High Charity drifted beneath this impervious network, illuminated by the glow from scores of warship engines.

Deep within, protected by legions of crack Covenant soldiers, the Sanctum of the Heirarchs was an island of calm. The walls, floor, and ceiling of the chamber were ornamented with mirrored shards made from the fused glass of countless worlds conquered by the Covenant Hegemony. They reflected the whispered thoughts of the one who sat in the center of this roomâmirrored them back, so they might consider the glory of its domain, and learn from its wisdomâ¦because there was no higher source of intellect, will, and truth alive in the galaxy.

In the middle of the chamber, hovering a meter off the floor upon its imperial dais, sat the Covenant High Prophet of Truth. Its body was barely discernible, covered as it was with a wide red cloak, and upon its head sat a glowing headpiece with sensor and respiratory apparatus that extended like insect antennae. Only its snout and dark eyes protrudedâ¦as did tiny claws from the sleeve of its gold underrobes.

The left claw twitchedâthe signal for the chamberâs doors to open.

The doors groaned and split apart, and a crack of light

appeared.

A single figure appeared silhouetted in the illumination. It bowed so deeply that its chest brushed against the floor.

âRise,â the Prophet of Truth whispered. The word was amplified by the chamber; it echoed and boomed forth as if a giant had spoken. âCome closer, Tartarus, and report.â

A ripple of shock passed through the Imperial Elite Protectors. They had never seen such a creature allowed so close to the Holy Ones.

âProtectors,â the Prophet commanded. âLeave us.â

Together the honor guards straightened, bowed, and filed out of the great chamber. They said nothing, but the Prophet saw the confusion on their features. Goodâsuch ignorance and puzzlement had its uses.

The Brute, Tartarus, strode across the great room. When he stood within three meters of the Prophet, he fell to one knee.

The creature was a magnificent specimen of viciousness. The Prophet marveled at its near-unthinking potential for mayhem; the rippling muscle under its dull gray skin could tear apart any opponentâeven a mighty Hunter. It was the perfect instrument.

âTell me what you found,â the Prophet said, its voice now truly a whisper.

Without looking up Tartarus reached for its belt and the attached orb.

The Prophet flicked its claw at the container. It floated free from Tartarusâs grasp and hovered. The top unscrewed, and three glittering chips of sapphire-colored crystal shimmered, and threw light and shadow upon the chamberâs mirrored surfaces.

The Prophetâs dais bobbled in the suddenly uneven gravityâbut it quickly compensated.

âThis is all?â it asked.

âEight squadrons combed the area surrounding the Eridanus Secundus asteroid field and Tau Ceti,â the Brute replied, bowing its head even lower. âMany were lost in the void. This is all there was to find.â

âA pity.â

The orbâs lid screwed itself back on, and then the container gently drifted into the Prophetâs grasp.

âIt may yet be enough for our purposesâ¦and one more relic from the Great Ones, as precious as they are, will soon make no

difference to us.â The Prophet tucked the container deep in the folds of its underrobe. âMake sure those pilots who survived are well rewarded. Then execute them all. Quickly. Quietly.â

âI understand,â Tartarus replied with a hint of anticipation thickening his voice.

The Prophet inhaled deeply, released a rasping sigh, and then asked, âAnd what of the *Unyielding Hierophant*?â

âThe reports are unclear, Your Grace,â Tartarus replied. âThe renegade flagship *Ascendant Justice* was involved, and destroyed. We are unsure what triggered the stationâs detonation. The recorded communications channels were flooded with system error reports prior to its destruction. The Engineers are saying this is impââ

The Prophet held up one claw, indicating silence. Tartarus halted midsyllable.

âA regrettable turn of events,â the Prophet said, âbut in the end, only an insignificant setback. Have the ships that are battle-ready rendezvous with us at the site of the cataclysm.â

âAnd what of the incompetent, High One? The one who lost *Ascendant Justice*?â

âBring him before the Council. Let his fate match the magnitude of his failure.â

Tartarusâs face twisted with what passed for a grin among his species.

âSoon the Great Journey shall begin,â the Prophet of Truth continued, and its claws curled into fists. âAnd let nothing in this universe impede our progress.â

Adjunct

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Amy,

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My name is Charles VanKeerk, and for the last five years Iâve been working alongside your husband to protect the dreams that demand so much from us. I am so sorry that in all the time Iâve spent with Sam I never had a chance to meet you in person. As you know, our situation prevents us from being able to move about as we wish or see those we fight for, and because of this I am a stranger to youâ¦and it pains me that you have to receive this message from a stranger:

Sam is gone.

For your protection, I canât give you any details on where or how he died, but know that he was a hero, and he died as one. Everyone who fought alongside him these last years loved him as a brother, and his determination and gentle spirit were strengths to us all. It is a tragedy that Sam was forced to this fight, but forced he was, as we all are, by the most important need we haveâthe need to be free.

I know words canât help right now, but please donât doubt the value of Samâs sacrifice or the wisdom of our fight, even in these terrible times. You will ask why, in the face of such an overwhelming external threat, we would take up arms against our own kind rather than fight against the Covenant. We struggle with this question every dayâ¦Sam fought with it every day. But what keeps us going is the certainty that thereâs no future in helping those who would only put us in a cage for helping them win.

Youâve seen how the UNSC treats us, taking and taking but only offering empty promises in returnâ¦any planet outside their precious inner circle is plundered and left to suffer starvation, plague, or the onslaught of the Covenant. If only more of us would find the strength Sam had, perhaps we could make the UNSC recognize that it doesnât matter if you come from Earth or Harvest or anywhereâ¦weâre all equal, and we should all be treated as equals. Until that day comes, however, we have to

fight every threat to our way of lifeâ¦be it human or Covenant.

I write all of this to try to give you some comfort, some justification for such a terrible loss. I hope you can believe in our cause as much as Sam did, and I hope you can believe me when I say we all miss him terribly. Despite whatever you may have seen or read recently in the UNSC-controlled media, Samâs death was a proud death. A noble death. He died for all of us, and I know for a certainty that he died for you.

My heartfelt condolences on your loss,
Charles

Tug Oâ War

overturned, floating husk of steel, plastic components, and other random materials that had come free over the years. This was just one of hundreds of ships adrift in the debris field crowning the planet Biko.

Decades ago, when the Covenant first arrived here, they had swiftly and comprehensively wiped out the UNSC forces protecting it. When they were done, they had shunted the debris toward the planetâs northern pole, clearing the way for what inevitably came next: an excessive yet surgical display of their brutality through the orbital bombardment of Bikoâs surface.

Oliver had never seen the Covenant up close, but he was fairly certain that if he ever encountered them, heâd mess his pants. Fortunately for Oliver that wasnât very likely. Despite the intensity of the last few moments, his actual occupation as a âfetcherâ was largely uneventful, something made even more banal by the endless paperwork his employer, Warner & Ives, bureaucratically tacked onto each operation.

Fetchers hadnât been terribly popular till about twenty years ago when the UNSC discovered that they were closing in on a shortage of translight engines. Starships were expensive, of course, but so were manned rescue and recovery operations. With something as costly and as difficult to develop as a reliable slipspace drive, supply never seemed to keep up with demand, and the complexity of the drives changed the economic balance. Thatâs where fetchers came in. Private companies who specialized in âfetchingâ could now get paid good money for solid, working translight engines recovered from derelict ships.

Oliver didnât doubt that the UNSC could send their own people to reclaim drives like the *Dresden*âs, but like many things the government could do, theyâd rather pay someone else to do it for them. Thusly, fetching became a flourishing market that would allow companies like Warner & Ives to set up clients with contractors like Oliver. Heâd locate, recover, and return the slipspace drive and thereâd be a nice, fat paycheck for him in return.

At least that *had* been the plan, he thought, as both he and the drive finally reached the rear bay of the tug. But all that had been before he met Gretchen Navarro at a university bistro on Tribute.

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After performing half a dozen tests to check the driveâs extant radiation levels, everything passed with flying colors and the drive seemed to be in perfect working order. Typically, drives suffered fairly superficial damage, with most issues relating to their external systems or mounting hardware. The drives themselves were designed to be physically bulletproof, for obvious reasons. Slipspace accidents tended to fall into categories unrelated to their normal working operations, with human error and ship mass accidents at the top of the list. Oliver meandered to the side of the bay and closed the main door, repressurizing the room and discarding his atmospheric suit.

He tapped a release button on a wall-mounted control panel and two doors opened on the port side of the tugâs bayâa beaten-up ship he called *Galileoâs Worst Enemy*. The tug was named, ostensibly, after Father Orazio Grassi, a priest and mathematician whoâd lived in a time when the church controlled both state and science. Oddly, Grassi, a Jesuit, had objected to Galileoâs cometary theory on *scientific,* rather than canonical, grounds. The ensuing tiff, rather than snuff out Galileoâs genius, served only to stoke it, and led to some of Galileoâs most convincing work.

Back in the artificial gravity of the tug, Oliver was greeted by the waddling figure of Mabel, his three-legged dog. Mabel was a miracle of sorts. While scouring the wreckage above the planet Dwarka, he had discovered an abandoned but relatively untouched colony ship from another era, the CAA *Butterworth*. Oliver wasnât certain how or why it came to be thereâor even how it had survived the Covenantâs attack on the planetâbut when he found it, it was empty, save for one creature: a hungry, nervous, but ultimately happy three-legged golden retriever.

âEasy there, girl,â he said, walking around the base of the drive, his eyes and hands inspecting it simultaneously. âLet me give it a quick look and then weâll head out. I promise.â

Time hadnât been an issue before Oliver received notice from his contract handler, a guy who he only knew as Steve. Their client this time around was the Office of Naval Intelligence and apparently they needed the *Dresden*âs slipspace drive a week ago. This complicated matters because in the meantime heâd

somehow managed to square away a date with an incredibly beautiful, yet challenging woman from Tributeâa Ms. Gretchen Navarro.

How exactly he would make it back to both Cygnus for the drive handoff and to Tribute for his date with Gretchen, he didnât know. All he knew was that the date was in fifteen days and he didnât have enough time to do both. But as his hands ran across the truck-sized angularity of the *Dresden*âs translight engine, he realized somethingâthis wasnât a standard military FTL drive. This was something else.

The serial number and its general shape and size indicated that it was a â44 model made by the Oros Trading Company based out of Mars. But this drive wasnât a â44 model and it most certainly was not from Marsâand its shape, though extremely close to a commercial drive, wasnât an exact match. He scanned the serials to double-check and snorted in triumph. This particular drive was what fetchers referred to as a âsaddle box.â

Saddle boxes were never commercially produced or civilian-issued. Not ever. They were made exclusively for military experiments with slipspace travel and they were extremely rare. So rare that heâd only seen two in his lifetime.

Slipspace was a rare scientific commodityâa technology and science that were loosely understood, frequently used, and mostly controlled. But like early theories of gravity, most of the understanding was inference and conjecture. There were significant unknowns. This might have been one reason that Oliver, despite having acquired a doctoral degree in quantum electro-dynamics, had decided to become a fetcher and not a physicist. That and because it paid damn well and working in labs wasnât his really idea of fun.

Giving the saddle box one last look, Oliver finally knelt down and tenderly scratched the fur at the base of Mabelâs neck. âIn fifteen days? I donât think itâs ever been done before. But with this thing, maybe, just maybeâ¦â

Mabel let out a small huffing sound that ended in a whine. Oliver didnât speak dog fluently, but he took it as a plaintive plea for him not to chicken out this time around.

âAll right, all right,â he said, standing up. âLetâs do it.â

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Gretchen Navarro was incredibly good looking. She wasnât mediocre in any way, shape, or form, and she knew it. She was confident to the point of arrogance and perhaps just a little bit vain. The chances heâd ever meet another girl like Gretchen were next to nil, but even those chances paled in comparison to the possibility of any girl like her saying âyesâ to a date with him ever again. Apparently, their long talk about fetching had intrigued herâwhy exactly, he had no idea.

Suffice it to say, this date was important.

Oliver entered the tugâs bridge and stared up intently across Bikoâs curved horizon line. He flipped three switches and nudged a throttle, dropping his body into a snug, fabric-covered seat that looked like it had been plucked out of a living room, not the deck of a tug.

Galileoâs Worst Enemy started to gradually turn about, pushing away from the debris field that eerily clouded the northern pole of the planet, like flies around a festering carcassâin this case, a cold, mummified carcass. Biko looked like all planets did once they ran headlong into the Covenant war machine. It was a dead series of grays, blacks, and reds, the charred remains of a way of life that had been swept away far quicker than it had first appeared.

Slowly filling the front viewscreen was another shipâthe CAA *Butterworth*. Mabelâs residence and his own ownership of Mabel had allowed him, with some clever interpretation of maritime salvage law, to claim the *Butterworth* as his own. As he approached, the colony ship opened her starboard bay doors and *Galileoâs Worst Enemy* was smoothly drawn in by an automated electromagnetic tug system.

When fetching, it was important to have two separate ships for a few reasons, the primary being that fetching often required the operator to enter exceptionally dense fields of debris. This just wasnât possible from most affordable, slipspace-capable ships. On a normal fetching run, Oliver would typically park the *Butterworth* four to five thousand klicks from the prospect and then take *Galileoâs Worst Enemy* as close as possible.

âSo hereâs the problem, Mabel, and try to pay attention because Iâm not explaining it again.â

Mabel promptly turned away, but Oliver continued unabated.

âBiko is located roughly twenty-four light-years from Cygnus

and itâs about fifty-eight light-years from Tribute. From point to point the total trip would be well over a month in length.â

Mabel looked up at him, as if she too were puzzled by the relativistic problem, and sneezed.

âYeah, my thoughts exactly,â he said. âThatâs where the saddle box comes in.â

in those extremely rare and usually classified instances, how have ships been tracked as arriving at one location before theyâve even left another?â

Mabel had nothing to say to thatâOliver wondered briefly if that meant it was actually sinking in, or if she thought he was a complete idiot. Probably the latter, but he continued nevertheless. They entered the engine room, which was large, cavernous, and darkâat its center was the newly installed saddle box, which heâd hastily mounted in an effort to buy time. It was also the one Oliver used to make their jump away from Biko.

âHeh,â he said, reading the sensor relay screen. âNever seen that alignment error before.â Oliver feverishly keyed a response that cleared the error but left a puzzled look on his face. He shrugged it off and continued around the machine.

âThis saddle box is some kind of skunkworks prototype drive that Iâm guessing was manufactured by ONIâand Iâm guessing again that it was designed to measure dilation by generating several microjumps within a single transition. Not such a big deal for the Covenant, since many physicists believe thatâs how the aliens pull off their insane speeds, but itâs a huge deal for humanity. The special thing about this particular drive is that because it can accurately navigate several jumps within slipspace, it can accentuate and coerce to some degree the previously unpredictable dilation.â He paused, casting a glance toward a control panel near the driveâs base. âTo what degree though, I donât know. Not even sure if the people who made it really knew, to be honest.â

Oliver did, however, know that the UNSC had been testing such jumps for the purpose of communication probes and drop pod deployment of troops from shielded positions within slipspace. He knew these things because ONI had consulted him more than once already on the matter. But, since he wasnât involved in the development of those projects, he didnât know exactly where they stood at this moment in time.

âSo hereâs the deal. Iâm about 99 percent certainâwhich is usually certain enough for meâthat we can mount the *Butterworth*âs old slipspace drive to our tug. At a specific point, the *Butterworth* will release the tug from its cargo hold with us on board.â Mabel responded with a cocked head and a slight drop of her tail. There she goes again, Oliver thought, doubting

his plan already. âWhen we get to the appropriate spot within the slipspace transition, weâll use the *Butterworth*âs old drive to slip back into normal space, right smack-dab in Tributeâs front yard.â

Oliver continued to size up the driveâs well-shielded components, this time punching a series of queries into the control panel. Mabel had already dropped to the ground with her chin resting on her front two pawsâtwo-thirds of all of the paws she had left.

âWhile *Galileoâs Worst Enemy* safely drops back to normal space, within taxiing distance of Tribute and perfectly on time, the *Butterworth* will continue on course, following a staggered series of automated jumps, all the way through to its designated slipspace exit in Cygnus. Weâll have a playback message and verbal claim of continued ownership running on loop for the dock workers. And, of course, Steve will be there to get the saddle box to the ONI folks on time.â

Oliver then asked Mabel what she thought of his foolproof plan. He wasnât entirely sure that he could count it as a positive affirmation, but just then she broke wind and he took that as a sign of relief.

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And for the longest time, his plan *was* entirely foolproofâwell, right up to the point where the radiation klaxons blared on the tug. Now the ship was being hammered from every angle in slipspace.

Oliver and Mabel had barely made it aboard when the tug was somehow knocked out of the *Butterworth*âs cargo bay and began literally peeling apart while they tumbled in the colony shipâs radiation wake. Technically speaking, that wasnât supposed to happenâthe *Butterworth* should have maintained its transition path for at least another day before executing a jump, but for some reason, it hadnât.

That was definitely a big problem, but the more immediate issue was trying to get into the cryostorage pod and seal it before *Galileoâs Worst Enemy* became *Galileoâs Spare Parts*. Oliver now carried Mabel and bounded as fast as he could through the tugâs narrow corridors as the ship was repeatedly battered. With its shielding failing, the ship was like fresh carrion amid a torrent of

vultures; its various pieces would be picked and plucked until all that remained was a skeleton.

Oliver didnât want to be picked or plucked.

Finally, he reached the cryostorage chamber, what essentially amounted to a large closet for a ship of this size. He entered one of two pods, fortunately large enough for both him and Mabel to snugly fit. The pod immediately slammed shut, filling with gas which would coalesce, eventually drowning them both in an artificial surfactant that would put them to sleep while it kept them alive. Through the narrow porthole, Oliver watched as the interior of *Galileoâs Worst Enemy* heated to a bright red, began melting into shreds, and eventually ripped asunder, all while simultaneously reemerging back into normal space.

All that was left of the battered tug were thousands of scraps of flotsam and jetsam and a single, radiation-shielded cryostorage pod.

Â

As he stared into the blackness, barely recognizable star systems drifting and rotating past the podâs vid-screen, he thought about Gretchen Navarro, beautiful, elegant, impatient, and bad-tempered.

He patted Mabel on the head, glanced at the pulsing light of the slow-impulse thruster monitor and the reassuring beat of the emergency locator beacon, and muttered, âSheâll have to wait.â

And sleep took them gently, before the first wisp of cold seeped into their crÃ¨che.

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Transcript of the second psychological debriefing of Lieutenant Frederic, Spartan-104, conducted by ONI Psychiatrist Dr. Veronica Clayton, Ph.D.

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DR. VERONICA CLAYTON:
[redacted]
S-104:
[redacted]
DR. CLAYTON: I'D LIKE TO REVISIT THE EVENTS ABOARD THE *PILLAR OF AUTUMN,* JUST BEFORE YOUR DEPLOYMENT PLANET-SIDEâBEFORE THE ENGAGEMENT, AND TRAGIC EVENTS, ON Reach.
S-104: [silence]
DR. CLAYTON: WHAT WAS THE MORALE AMONG YOUR FELLOW Spartans AT THIS POINT?
S-104:
[redacted]
DR. CLAYTON:
[redacted]
S-104: ASIDE FROM BEING AN INVALUABLE MILITARY RESOURCE, Reach WAS OUR HOMEâORâ¦IT WAS THE CLOSEST THING TO HOME ANY OF US HAD EVER KNOWN.
DR. CLAYTON: SO, YOU SAY THERE WAS AN ATTACHMENTâA CONNECTIONâBETWEEN THE Spartans TRAINED ON Reach AND THE PLANET ITSELF. As YOU SAID, THIS WAS YOUR HOME.
S-104: WE TAKE EACH ENCOUNTER SERIOUSLY, MAâAM, AND WE VIEW EVERY Covenant ENGAGEMENT AS CRITICAL, BUT WE WERENâT ABOUT TO LET THE ENEMY GO UNCHECKED IN OUR OWN BACKYARD.
DR. CLAYTON: WHEN YOU SAY âUS,â âWEââYOU ARE REFERRING TO YOUR FELLOW Spartans?
S-104: YES, MAâAM.
DR. CLAYTON: AND WHEN YOU SPEAK FOR YOUR UNIT AS WELL? YOU SPEAK FOR THE OTHER Spartans WHEN YOU SAY THIS?
S-104: WE'REâWE ALWAYS AREâALL OF USâEAGER TO ACCOMPLISH THE GOALS SET FORTH BEFORE US AND ACHIEVE VICTORY WITHIN A GIVEN TACTICAL SITUATIONâ¦
DR. CLAYTON: [redacted]
S-104: [redacted]â¦I'M NOT FINISHEDâ¦AND, AS THIS SESSION IS ONE IN WHICH I AM ENCOURAGED TO SPEAK FREELY, I WOULD APPRECIATE THE OPPORTUNITY TO DO SO.
DR. CLAYTON: [redacted]
S-104: THANK YOU. YES, AS Spartans WE ANTICIPATE OUR INVOLVEMENT IN ANY MILITARY CAMPAIGN. ITâS WHO WE ARE. ITâS WHAT WE WERE BORN TO DO. WEâRE HERE TO WIN THIS WAR AND WEâRE EAGER TO DO JUST THAT. To BE FRANK,

maâam, is this another inquiry on military ethics based on civilian assumptions about the SPARTAN-II project? Ifitis, Iâd like to speak with Lord Hood beforeâ

DR. CLAYTON: â assumptions,â as you call them, are based upon years of observation and research. You cannot change whoâwhatâyou are.

S-104: I would never ask to change who I am, doctor. I am proud to be who I am, and any other Spartan would say the same. Especially considering the nature of our present enemy and the current direction of this conflictâ

DR. CLAYTON: I am aware of the current direction of this conflict, Lieutenant, but that is not the topic of this discussionâ

S-104: I would most certainly argue that you are not familiar with anything of the sort. Have you ever seen a planet glassed?

DR. CLAYTON:

S-104: On a vid. Not in a feed. With your own two eyesâ¦. We werenât going to let that happen to Reach. So, yes, we were eager, and we were readyâfor all the good it did.

DR. CLAYTON: Were you frustrated before the deployment?

S-104: Excuse me?

DR. CLAYTON: Reach was important to you and your unitâ

S-104: Every world is important.

DR. CLAYTON: I do not mean, Reachâ Reach most assuredly had a deeper emotional resonance for youâfor all of you. I mean; no oneâno one of usâbelieved Reach would ever be in danger. It was always safe. It was always our rock. And nowâ¦itâs gone. Judging from your previous statements, this had to have had some psychological effect on your team.

S-104: It absolutely did not.

DR. CLAYTON: For all of your training and skills, you are still human. How could it not?

S-104: Our only concern at the time was the mission at hand, nothing more and nothing less.

DR. CLAYTON: Speaking of the mission, once RED FLAG went belly-up, You were chosen to lead the team deployed to the planet surface by Master Chief Petty Officer, John-117, correct?

S-104: Yes, maâam.

DR. CLAYTON: But you did not want to go groundside, did you? The transcripts aboard the *Autumn* say that you wanted toâ

S-104: I was, and am, fully prepared to serve in whatever role deemed necessary to win this war.

DR. CLAYTON: Here, then, focusing on your team and the specific objective placed upon you as field leader of Red Team, what happened during your teamâs

DESCENT TOWARD REACHâ¦WHAT WAS *YOUR* SPECIFIC MENTAL STATE AT THIS POINT? YOU SAY YOU WERE EAGER BEFORE THE ACTUAL DEPLOYMENT, HOW WERE YOU FEELING ONCE THE MISSION GOT UNDERWAY?

S-104: SOLOMID. WE WERE DROPPING IN HOT AND THE FULL SQUAD HAD TO BE ALERT TO ANY AND ALL THREATSâ

DR. CLAYTON: I'M SURE. YOU HAD THE LIVES OF YOUR FELLOW SPARTANS IN YOUR HANDS. A SINGLE MISTAKE COULD HAVE KILLED THEM ALL, INCLUDING YOU. YET IT SEEMS LIKE IT WAS ONE ERROR AFTER ANOTHERâ

S-104: I'M NOT QUITE SURE I UNDERSTAND WHAT YOUâRE SUGGESTING, DOCTOR.

DR. CLAYTON: DO YOU REGRET THE FACT THAT YOU WERE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE LIVES OF EVERYONE UNDER YOUR COMMAND? OR THAT YOUR MENTAL STATE WAS NOT IDEAL AND THAT YOUR DECISIONS DURING THE INITIAL PHASE OF YOUR DEPLOYMENT PUT LIVES, INCLUDING THE VERY VALUABLE, AND INCREDIBLY EXPENSIVE LIVES OF TWENTY-ONE OTHER SPARTANS, IN JEOPARDY.

S-104: I'M NOT SURE YOU HAVE A FULL UNDERSTANDING OF THEâ

DR. CLAYTON: [OVERLAP] BRACE YOURSELVES.â

S-104: [OVERLAP]

DR. CLAYTON: DURING THE LAST YOU BROADCAST THOSE TWO WORDSâÂBRACE YOURSELVESâÂOVER FLEETCOM 7. THIRTY-NINE RECEIVERS PICKED UP THE TRANSMISSIONâTHIRTY-ONE BELONGING TO UNSC CRAFT, EIGHT ON CIVILIAN. AND THEREâS NO TELLING HOW MANY COVENANT VESSELS ACQUIRED THE SIGNAL, POTENTIALLY ALLOWING THEM TO BACKTRACK ITS SOURCE AND GAIN ACCESS TO OTHER FREQUENCIES AND DATA BEING TRANSMITTED DURING AND AFTER THE ENCOUNTER.

S-104: I'M AWAREâ

DR. CLAYTON: â¦OF THE SITUATION.â IâM AWARE. S-087 HAS ALREADY CONFIRMED THAT ASSERTION. STILLâDOESNâT SEEM LIKE A MISTAKE A SPARTAN SHOULD, OR WOULD, MAKE. YET YOU MADE IT. MAKES ME WONDER WHAT OTHER MISTAKES YOU MAY HAVE MADE.

S-104: I'M SORRY, IS THIS A PSYCH EVAL, OR AN INTERROGATION?

DR. CLAYTON: THAT'S UP TO YOU, LIEUTENANT, BUT THAT IS ACTUALLY A VERY GOOD QUESTION. YOUR ANSWER WILL SAY A LOT ABOUT YOU AND HOW YOU VIEW YOUR ROLE AS A LEADER AMONGST YOUR PEERS.

S-104: I'M SURE IN MY ROLE AND THE TACTICAL DECISIONS I MAKE BEFORE, DURING, AND FOLLOWING COMBAT, AND SO ARE MY PEERS.

DR. CLAYTON: I'VE READ YOUR REPORT THE PELICAN WITH YOUR ENTIRE SQUAD: DO YOU FEEL THAT WAS THE RIGHT TACTICAL DECISION?

S-104: ABSOLUTELY, AS I STATED IN MY REPORT TO CORTANA EN ROUTE TO SOL-YOU DID READ MY REPORT, DIDNâT YOU?

DR. CLAYTON: I'M ASKING YOU.

S-104: DID YOU KNOW THAT THE PELICAN TASKED WITH DELIVERING US TO THE SURFACE

WAS DAMAGED BEYOND USEâ

DR. CLAYTON: DR. LOSS OF THE SPARTANS BY ABANDONING THAT CRAFT.

S-104: WE'D HAVE LOST THEM ALL IF WEâD TRIED TO RIDE IT OUT. LOOK AT THE CALCULATIONS ON OUR TRAJECTORY AND SPEEDâAND THE SHIELD DAMAGE UPON ENTRYâTHE REPORT IS CRYSTAL CLEAR. WE HAD NO CHOICE BUT TO EXIT THE VEHICLE AND USE THE TERRAIN AND OUR ARMOR TO SECURE RELATIVELY SAFE LANDINGS.

DR. CLAYTON: ACCORDING TO YOU, ALL TWENTY-ONE SPARTANS RESPONDED WITH AN âAFFIRMITIVEâ AT YOUR ORDER TO âAIM FOR THE TREETOPS.â WHY THE TREETOPS? WAS THERE NOT A SAFER AREA TO LAND?

S-104: WHAT WE HAD BELOW US WAS GROUND. THE TREES HAD ENOUGH GIVE TO DAMPEN THE IMPACT AND SLOW THE FALL. BUT IF YOUâVE READ MY REPORT YOU KNOW ALL OF THIS ALREADY. IâVE BEEN THROUGH ENOUGH OF THESE SESSIONS TO KNOW WHEN ONI IS FISHING FOR SOMETHING ELSE, SO MAYBE WE CAN JUSTâ

DR. CLAYTON: DR. CLAYTON, YOU LOST FOUR SPARTANS ON IMPACT. SIX INJURED TO THE POINT OF IN EFFECTIVE NESS. BEFORE YOUR MISSION EVEN TOOK OFF, YOU WERE ALREADY RESPONSIBLE FOR THE LARGEST CASUALTY RATE OF ANY PREVIOUS ENDEAVOR INVOLVING SPARTAN-II SOLDIERS. AT THIS POINT YOUâVE MADE WHAT SOME WOULD CONSIDER AN ILL-ADVISED JUMP, DAMAGED YOUR SQUADâS EFFECTIVENESS SIGNIFICANTLY, AND NOW YOUâRE ON THE SURFACE OF A PLANET CONSIDERED OUR MOST PRECIOUS MILITARY ASSET AND HAVE BEEN TASKED TO DEFEND IT FROM AN INCOMING COVENANT INVASION WITH NO WEAPONS?

S-104: AN UNARMED SPARTAN DOESNâT STAY THAT WAY FOR LONGâ

DR. CLAYTON: DR. CLAYTON, YOU COMMANDEERED COVENANT WEAPONRY EN ROUTE TO YOUR OBJECTIVE. DID YOU MAINTAIN POSSESSION OF THE WEAPONS FOR FUTURE INSPECTION AND EVALUATION? THAT IS A STANDING DIRECTIVE, CORRECT? TO COLLECT ANY COVENANT TECH THAT MAY PROVIDE ADDITIONAL DETAILS ABOUT THEIR WEAPON SYSTEMS AND THE LIKE.

S-104: SIR, THERE ARE PLENTY OF THEM DOWN THERE RIGHT NOW. [POINTS TO EARTH THROUGH VIEWPORT] IF YOU REALLY WANT ONE, WHY DONâT YOU GO TAKE ONE FROM THEM?

DR. CLAYTON: DR. CLAYTON, I'M HERE WITH YOU.

S-104: I'M HERE WITH YOU, MAâAM, WHICH IS WHERE I SHOULD BE RIGHT NOW. THEREâS A WAR GOING ON AND THE LONGER MY TEAM AND I ARE STUCK UP HERE, THE MORE HELL THEYâRE GOING TO CAUSE DOWN THERE.

DR. CLAYTON: DO YOU CONSIDER THIS A WASTE OF YOUR TIME?

S-104: YOU'RE QUESTIONING MY LEADERSHIP ON REACH MORE THAN A MONTH AGO WHILE EARTH IS GOING TO HELL IN A HANDBASKET BELOW US, SO YES. IâD SAY THIS IS AN EGREGIOUS WASTE OF MY TIME. IâM CERTAIN THAT THE ADMIRAL WOULD FEEL THE SAME.

DR. CLAYTON: I COULD WORLD. I DONâT CARE WHAT YOU THINK OF MEâOR WHAT HOOD

THINKS OF MEâTHIS PROCESS IS IMPORTANT BECAUSE YOU *ARE* TOO IMPORTANT AND ITâSMY JOB TO HELP MAKE SURE THAT YOUâ*ALL OF YOU*âARE IN PRIME WORKING ORDER AND THAT THERE ARE NO CRACKS IN YOUR ARMORâMETAPHORICALLY SPEAKING. [PAUSE] CAN WE CONTINUE?

S-104: [SILENCE] [FLT ADM HOOD ENTERS ROOM]

FLT ADM HOOD: FLT ADM HOOD HERE. IS?

DR. CLAYTON: DR. CLAYTON. I THINK THAT YOU PLEASE LEAVE THIS ROOM!

FLT ADM HOOD: FLT ADM HOOD HERE. IS? WAS IT MARGARET?

DR. CLAYTON: DR. CLAYTON. IF ANYONE OF YOURâYOU DO NOT HAVE JURISDICTION OVER BETA-5 PROTOCOL, I WAS SENT HERE toâ

FLT ADM HOOD: FLT ADM HOOD. THE ENTIRE PLANET. WEâRE FIGHTING A WAR DOWN THERE AND IF ANYONE THINKS THAT KEEPING ONE OF OUR BEST UP HERE FOR A Q&A SESSION IS GOING TO WIN IT, THEN TELL THEM TO TAKE IT UP WITH ME. [TO MP ESCORT] GENTLEMEN, PLEASE ESCORT THE LADY TO HER SHIP. [DR. CLAYTON IS ESCORTED OUT OF ROOM]

FLT ADM HOOD: FLT ADM HOOD. WEâRE SENDING BLUE DOWNSTAIRSâYOU READY TO GET BACK TO WORK?

S-104: SIR, SIR. [TRANSCRIPT ENDS]

Petra

was pretty sure the few folks who actually lost sleep over the war hadnât exactly taxed Forsetiâs energy grid by keeping the lights burning night after night.

She took a hit off the beer, which she realized hadnât been touched since she opened it; the wash of hops was a little too bitter but at least it made her feel like she was doing something other than stewing. Petra knew it was ugly to be so dismissive of Forseti just because theyâd never had to worry about the plasma ICUs or the tent cities or the salvage showers that rained chunks of UNSC battle fleet back down onto the planets theyâd sacrificed themselves to protect. Unfair, sureâbut Petra had spent the sunnier part of ten years shoveling those stories as a feed stringer. A kidâs puppet show would probably have been less distilled than some of her stories once they made their way downstream; to the citizens of the cozy little planets like Forseti, the Covenant were little more than the boogeyman under the bed, painted in Technicolor by reporters like her. Places like Forseti just made Petra uncomfortable. They made her either a liar, an incompetent, or an accomplice to a conspiracy no one had bothered to explain to her.

Petra finally took a deep breath and looked back at the small coffee table where sheâd dumped her kit after she got back from meeting her contact, a retired major whoâd settled here but had kept a few souvenirs of his time in the service. The cheap holopad idled silently, an island away from the rest of the clutter.

You can scratch all the phantom itches or fiddle with the light-to-dark ratio of the curtains all you want, Petra, old girl. This just smells like you doing that thing where you pretend thereâs not a story when you obviously think there is, so can we please just get to the part of the show where we figure out if anyoneâs flight itineraries gotta change, eh sister?

The assignment Petra had been working for the last few weeks was really a no-brainer. *The Magellan*, one of the bigger feeds Petra sold stories to, was looking for a memorial piece on the anniversary of the Battle of Voi. Even though the details of the extragalactic conflict undertaken by the human and Sangheili forces had become (mostly) public knowledge shortly after the return of what was left of the UNSC frigate *Forward Unto Dawn*, the action in Africa was celebrated by the masses as the turning

point of the warâor at least that was the way it was spun to the Press Corps, and there didnât seem like any good reason to fight the current on that one. The edit staff at *The Magellan* liked Petraâshe made her deadlines and during the war had a habit of landing material that would usually have been accompanied by a next-of-kin announcement. She was the logical choiceâthe hatful of awards sheâd scooped up for her coverage of the SPARTAN-IIs (once the flacks at Section Two had decided they *wanted* the Spartans covered) made her fodder for this kind of job, and sheâd been ground zero at both New Mombasa and Voi, reporting those slugfests âall up-close and personal-like.â Mostly, though, Petraâs impressive sources within the UNSC establishment had made other war journos look like they were pounding the leisure beat, and *The Magellan* was hoping that through her deep ties, sheâd find a way to outfluff all the other fluff pieces that were bound to hit the nets for the anniversary.

The gig was good, if a bit dusty for Petraâs tastesâshe much preferred things that *were happening* to those that *had happened*. She dutifully scanned all the newsvids and shuffled through all the declassified docs (*just like they taught me in Cub Reporter school all them years agoâ¦*). And within a couple days, she had pasted together what she imagined pretty much every other newsie would already be sitting onâsomething ânice.â Commemorative/thorough/boring/etc. A good first draft, but nothing to write home about. Then Petra started rolling some calls.

Voi was about more than just a pointy Covenant ship and some big metal crater appearing in the desert. Everybody knew that. The word âForerunnerâ had become part of the lexicon of the late war regardless of whether 90 percent of the people out there knew what exactly it was referring to or even if it was a person, place, or thing. There were the Halo ringsâthose most of the human population did *not* know anything aboutâbut in military circles, the whispers were just a little too loud to dismiss and a little too soft to publish. And that final battleâthe place referenced in the Voi after-action reports and the debriefing statements from that Sangheili Arbiter. The Ark. There were seeds, all right. Petra was pretty sure she could get her contacts to slip her enough sugar to put together a *real* story; maybe not another award magnet, but at least a tale with a bit more kick

than the sort of thing her mother would paw through on Sunday afternoons. As things turned out, though, Petra had been too modest in her thinking.

A picture started to formâ¦ Petra chuckled aloud as the phrase spun into her head, visions of some schticky old psychic waving a gloved hand over a much-abused crystal ball at one of the carnivals she and her buddy Tom went to as kids. *Well,* something *formed, all right,* she thought. Petra hadnât expected her sources to serve up, piece by piece, a roadmap to the final months of the war, much less the interesting narrative they told about the Spartan Master Chief Petty Officer who had been at the center of it all.

Of course Petra had heard of the guyâwas pretty sure he was part of one of the SPARTAN-II squads sheâd seen in action, in fact. In the days following the return of the *Forward Unto Dawn*, Petra remembered random mentions of âSpartan-117â popping out of the ethereal chatter on numerous occasions. The Master Chief was obviously a âsoldier of noteâ and as such a fairly well-protected asset by ONI, but this business with the Forerunner doomsday weapons and the parasitic Floodâthis was something else entirely. This manâs actions deserved to be known. Others felt the same, and so Petra Janecekâs Voi segment was soon reframed in the context of how a single human soldier had single-handedly changed the entire course of the war.

And then she was on Forseti. The whole trip should have been a footnote. In order to appease the powers that be, sheâd decided to use Voi as the wrapper around which the Master Chief story would be told. It made sense, but the way she saw it, that approach would necessitate intimacyâher audience needed to walk where the Chief had walked, see what the Chief had seen. Difficult considering the glassings carried out in the African basin by the Elites, but there was more than one way to put people in the Chiefâs shoes. Which is how Petra had stumbled upon the message.

The messageâ¦ Petra sank into the couch, letting her weight drag her down into the cushion depths that she prayed would protect her from her own inquisitiveness. She noodled the holopad with the toe of her sneaker, sighing. *For Godâs sakes, youâre such a friggînâ drama queenâTHIS IS NOTHING! Itâs not a smoking gun! Itâs not going to blow the lid off anything! Itâsâ¦itâsâ¦*

It was an undotted *i*.

A thing unresolved.

A hint.

Most likely with a perfectly reasonable explanation.

Petra played the message back again.

âChief! High Charity, the Prophetsâ holy city, is on its way to Earthâ¦with an army of Flood!â The blue-purple hologramâs impassioned plea tugged at Petra, even though she had always been vaguely creeped out by smart AIs.

âI canât tell you everythingâitâs not safe,â Cortana continued. âThe Gravemindâit knows Iâm in the system. But it doesnât know about the portalâ¦where it leads.â

Petra closed her eyes, as much to shut out whatever paths this message might lead to as to focus harder on the AIâs words.

âOn the other side, thereâs a solution. A way to stop the Floodâwithout firing the remaining Halo rings.â

Whatever approximated pain in an AI coursed through the tiny hologramâs featuresâsomething immediately unpleasant. â*Unnh!* Hurry, Chiefâthe Ark. There isnât much time!â

The recording ended. Without hesitation, Petra leaned forward and scrubbed backward through it again, bluish light flickering over her furrowed brow.

ââside, thereâs a solution. A way to stop the Floodâwithout firing the remaining Halo rings.â

Petra had already packed the Ark dossier sheâd put together, but she didnât really need it anymore; sheâd memorized the big beats. The UNSC and the Elites had gotten lucky when the Flood had come to them en masse, and the Master Chief had used the replacement Halo ring the Ark was constructing to wipe them all out in one fell swoop.

A way to stop the Flood. Without firing the remaining Halo rings.

A way to stop the Flood.

A way.

Was she talking about the replacement ring? Absolutely possible; she was obviously knowledgeable about the Portal and where it led, so perfectly reasonable that she could have known there was another Halo installation. Technically, it wouldnât involve firing the âringsâ plural, *right?*

Could the Ark have been a weapon? Details are fairly

sketchyâOK, very sketchyâbut as the mother of all Forerunner artifacts, itâs certainly not out of the realm of possibility. Although it was meant as a fallback position to fire the Halo rings from, so why would you need to fire them at all if the Ark itself possessed a weapon that could stop the Flood?

Orâ¦

With a surly stab, Petra quickly toggled the holopad off. The âorâ was what she knew with certainty would keep her sleeping hours to a minimum for the foreseeable future. âOrâ couldnât be bargained with, it wouldnât get bored and run off to play with its little friends, it wasnât going to show up at her door at 11 P.M. a week from now claiming it was all a big misunderstanding. The only cure for âorâ was to find out what the hell the little glowstick was on about. If there was some other instrument of destruction Cortana had set her sights on to use against the nigh-undefeatable Floodâ¦well, that certainly wasnât going to be a footnote, now, was it?

Petraâs hand flopped onto the couch, smoothing the cushions as if she were petting her folksâ dog, Handsome, back home on Lenapi. The pillows were soft and cool from the breeze blowing in through the balcony doors. Petra mussed her hair, taking a last quiet moment to watch the curtains reverse course and get dragged out toward the city beyond. Then she was up, and on the phone with the cruise line to see if her ticket could be exchanged for the next flight to Earth.

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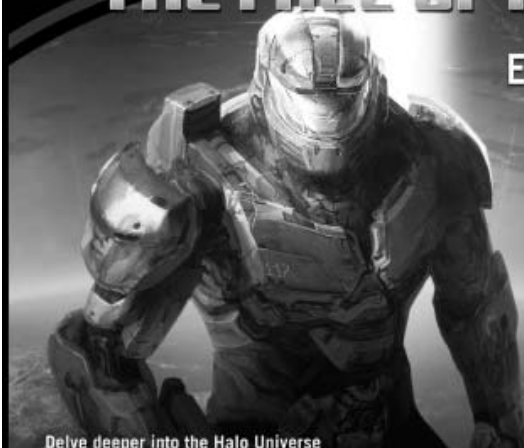
HALO

THE FALL OF REACH

Eric Nylund



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XBOX 360

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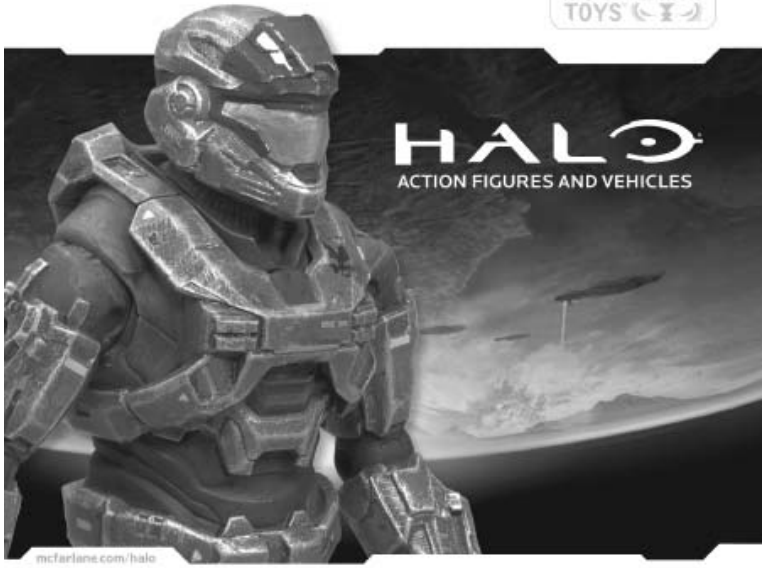

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